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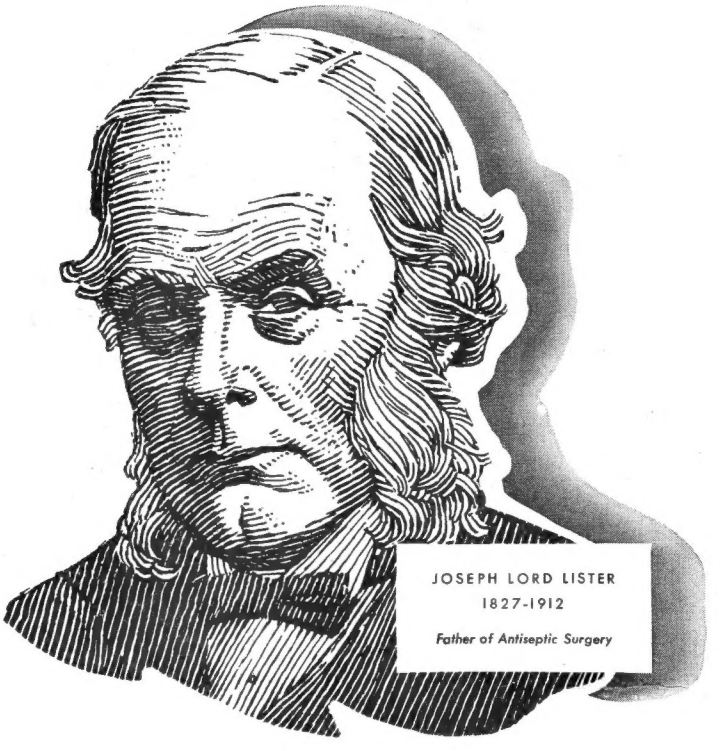
FIRST AUGUST NUMBER

Rangeland Bridgehead

By Clee Woods

A short story by Monte Castle



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RANCH ROMANCES

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CONTENTS

NOVEL •	RANGELAND BRIDGEHEAD	Clee Woods	4
NOVELETTE •	SILVERDUST	Dorothy L. Bonar	54
SHORT STORIES •	DANGEROUS AGE	Marie de Nervaud	39
	RANCH STRUCK	Monte Castle	46
	EYE TO EYE	Austin Corcoran	72
	NORTH OF THE BORDER	J. Paul Loomis	80
SERIAL •	SIXGUN PROFESSOR, Part 2	Robert Dale Denver	88
DEPARTMENTS •	KNOW YOUR WEST, a Quiz		53
	CROSSWORD PUZZLE		108
	OUT OF THE CHUTES	Tex Sherman	109
	AMATEUR PAGE	Our Readers	110
	OUR AIR MAIL	Our Readers	111
	WHOM SHALL I MARRY?	Professor Marcus Mari	112

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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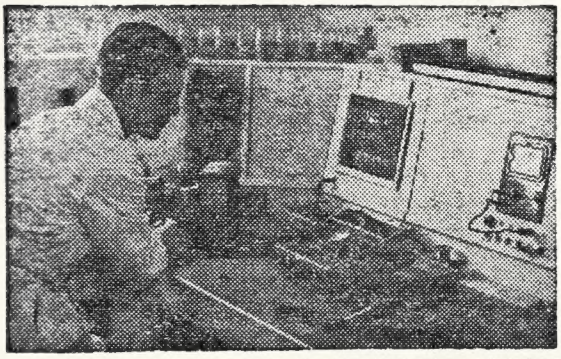

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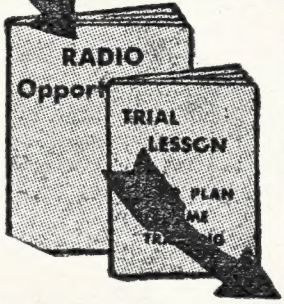

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Rangeland Bridgehead

THE aged taxi coasted down the long swing to save gas. With this start it topped a considerable rise and barely crept over it, like a lion stealing up on a colt.

As the car cleared the top almost noiselessly, Sergeant Dale Hutchinson caught sight of a tall man in the road some 300 yards ahead. About the same time, the man saw the car. Instantly, he glided behind a big alligator juniper and disappeared.

Dale sat up straighter beside the driver and looked, but he couldn't catch sight of the fellow again. The slinking man wore brown cowboy hat, overalls and boots. But something more than his dodging off the road made Dale wonder. There was no bow to the fellow's legs and he moved with a quick, decisive step wholly unlike a cowboy amble.

"Want to stop?" the driver asked, as they neared the spot.

"Nope, keep rollin'," Dale said.

If the guy wanted to hide, it was something to remember of course, but not to bother with now. He was anxious to get home. Only a mile more to go.

Half a mile from the house they discovered that a flash flood had chewed out the road there where the angry tumble of sandstone cliffs shoved the rutted course almost into the creek. Dale paid the frightened taxi driver and walked on down toward the Cross J ranch house which risked itself on the edge of a rock-jammed ridge.

Back home again in New Mexico! After nearly three years with the Marines, 19 cruel months of it in the South Pacific—and finally hell-flamed Tarawa where he had been stung red eight times within three minutes by shrapnel and machine-gun bullets.

In spite of the lingering pallor of hospitals

By Clee Woods

on his narrow face and a slight limp in his right leg, Dale Hutchinson still looked like a tall Devil Dog hunting for battle. A bayonet scar was slashed across his right cheek and more marks of island-taking lay beneath his green uniform. In spite of his limp, he walked as though he still couldn't throw off that tense, urgent drive of the battle veteran. Only in his deep-set blue eyes was there a difference, a sort of haunting sadness that didn't go away even when they rested on the long old 'dobe home and on the two staggy steers licking salt beside the round, picket-studded corrals. Breathing deep the tangy, life-filled air, he thought of the heavy, torrid, steamy air of Guadalcanal and New Britain.

When he could see only the roof and upper windows of the house, Dale stopped. To his ears there came the low, mournful howl of a dog.

"Must be old Rex," he thought. "Sounds like everything on earth had gone against him."

As he listened, Dale lit a cigarette. The smoke curled around his head and then the wind snatched it away as if to deny him even a placid ten seconds. He didn't notice. He was realizing only now that the old house looked younger than three years ago. Its walls gleamed white and it was trimmed in the brilliant Mexican blue which belongs to the country within sight of desert mountains where beds of deep purple color glow warmly late in the day.

He whistled to the howling dog. Old Rex, a white police dog, rushed around the house, barking. At first Rex didn't know him! Dale was afraid the dog might rush in to lay hold of him, so vicious was his approach as Dale neared the steps.

Before he could settle down to enjoy his home range, this fighting Marine had first to establish himself a bridgehead where life would be secure and peaceful.

There wasn't a soul at home. Dale went into the house where life first had been spanked into him. He stood again in front of the old fireplace built Mexican style in a corner. Same old room, but yet not the same. Lace curtains with a dash of blue in them were at the windows. New Navajo rugs were on the floor, the bright kind brilliant with red and orange and blue. There were new chairs, new pictures on the walls—one of them a large oil of a bold, surging desert scene. In the right-hand corner of the picture were the initials WG.

"Could that be Wanda Griffin?" he thought. "Never heard she paints."

Rex continued to growl outside. The echoes of Dale's steps sounded hollowly in the living room and through the hall. He went into his old room which was just off the living room.

A faint unreal fragrance struck his nostrils. he gazed in wonder at the perfume and powder boxes and creams on the dresser, noticed the dainty old rose of the bedspread, and an

odd feeling crept over him, partly awe, perhaps, partly reverence. Never before in all his life had he entered a girl's room—and this used to be his own little kingdom. Women just never had been a part of his life. First he'd lived here on this ranch, then at Roswell military school and then back on the ranch until the war clouds had made him feel he had to get into the Marines.

He was about to quit the room, feeling himself an intruder, when on a little table in a corner he caught sight of his own picture. Here in this room, with its freshly decorated walls and the delicate fragrances that made him fairly feel her presence, sight of his picture on the girl's table struck him like a blow. In answer to repeated requests from his father, he'd had that picture made in Australia.

Abruptly, Dale retreated from the room. He closed the door and went to the big kitchen where, ranch style, the family always had cooked and eaten. He was hungry. He hesitated before the big old kitchen cabinet. It'd been repainted. And how neatly everything was in place.

But he noticed that the dishes hadn't been removed from the long kitchen table after a meal. He counted five plates. Must've had company. The few cowboys employed on the modest Cross J usually cooked and ate to themselves in the bunkhouse.

All at once Dale stopped and stared at the table. The diners had departed in a hurry. Not a single one had finished his meal. The steaks were not half consumed. The beans and dried peaches on the plates had hardly been touched. Cold coffee stood in the cups. One cup had been overturned and lay shattered on the floor. A kitchen window was propped open, as it might have been for a noon meal.

"Couldn't be anything serious, though," he assured himself.

But uneasiness grew in him as he cooked his supper and ate. He kept thinking about that tall, quick-stepping man who'd dodged off the road and never showed himself again. He wished now he'd stopped the taxi.

Darkness fell and still nobody came to the house. Outside, the wind blew and a few drops of rain spattered the roof. He went to the door and tried to coax Rex inside. The big white dog growled and sneaked away. Within a few minutes Dale heard him off from the house howling. It was a low, mournful howl that crept through Dale.

There was nothing left for him to do but go to bed. But not in his old room—her room now. He took a bed in Eddie's old room, the one next to hers.

Sometime deep in the brooding night he came awake. Had he heard a sound? He listened. Yes. A board creaked in Wanda Griffin's room. He heard a low, scrubbing sound as though someone had struck a chair in the darkness. Then there was complete silence.

He took a flashlight from his bag and knocked on her door. When nobody answered even a second knock, he thrust the door open. Nobody was in there. He looked in the closet. Nobody there. But from the closet where all her dresses and riding outfits hung, there came another faint fragrance, like a far-off echo of the girl herself. He went back to bed, but it took him half an hour to fall asleep again. He came awake with a heavy thumping on the front door. He looked out the window. It was just barely dawnish, but in what light there was he saw a man peering from the corner of the woodshed. The thumping on the door grew harder.

"All right, hold your horses!" Dale called in ill humor.

He pulled on breeches and shoes and went to the door. There stood big bald-headed, owlish-looking Pat Erskine and a stranger. Behind them was a boy of about twelve. A star on Erskine's breast said he was sheriff now. The stranger had on a deputy's badge. Dale thought of the man he'd just seen at the back of the house. Erskine was surprised and embarrassed to see Dale.

He stammered, "Why—hi, Dale!"

"Howdy, Mr. Erskine," Dale returned.

ERSKINE recovered himself and rushed to business. "I've got the place surrounded with seven men, includin' of me," he said. "This boy here, he says there's funny business a-goin' on around here—mebbe deserters from the Army or somethin'."

"I know it," the lad put in, stepping out so Dale could see his slender figure. "There's been a—are you Dale Hutchinson?" the boy asked abruptly.

"Yep, Bud."

"Gosh," the boy said, "Dale Hutchinson! I betcha you've mowed down a lot more Nips even than Wanda says you did."

It was a boy's sudden, deep admiration for a man who's been to war and back.

"What's the idea?" Dale asked Erskine, frowning at the shotgun in the sheriff's hands.

"I went for the sheriff," the boy answered for Erskine. "You see, I'm Toughy Griffin. I caught two men sneaking in here yesterday morning and they beat it when I tried to talk to 'em. Been funny business for days. I jumped Wanda about it. She tried to tell me I was only imagining things. But I knew something was cooking here and I was afraid Wanda had something she couldn't handle. She's only a girl, you know. So I dealt myself in and went for the sheriff."

Toughy Griffin was red-headed, and his square-set face showed a maturity beyond his 12 years.

"When I heard the kid's story," Erskine said, "I put two and two together and decided— Well, you see, there are some deserters on the loose around here, and then I know for a fact Frosty Vernon is hid out in New Mexico somewhere."

"Tell me, Dale," Toughy forgot about business, "how many of those little monkey-faced suns of heaven did you really kill?"

Dale smiled faintly at the boy and didn't answer. "I spent the night here by myself," he said.

"Then where's my sis?" Toughy asked, alarmed. "She's here, isn't she?"

"She's not here," Dale said more to Erskine than the boy. "Maybe you better come in and take a look, Mr. Erskine."

Erskine was new as sheriff. Not to be led into a trap, he called two more of his men and took them into the house with him. They searched every room.

"Hey, sheriff, come here!" a man called from the door in awed tones.

Erskine went outside and the man there whispered to him. Erskine looked back at Dale as if with fresh suspicion. Then he called another man and whispered to him. The fellow remained near Dale while Erskine went to the arroyo a hundred yards to the rear of the house. In a moment the sheriff, his deputy and four specially deputized men marched back. Dale met them on the front porch.

"You absolutely sure you were alone here last night?" Erskine demanded of Dale. "Better answer straight, boy."

Dale never had known Erskine very well. Erskine came from another part of the county. But Dale now remembered that his father and Erskine once had had some trouble over a salt contract. Even a little prejudice in the man's heart might make a big difference. That difference was in Erskine's voice now.

"I thought once I heard someone in the room next to me," Dale answered. "But I looked and nobody was there."

"Well, the kid was right about funny business around here," Erskine said. Dale was sure he detected growing animosity in Erskine's voice.

"But I didn't say Dale was mixed up in it," Toughy protested.

"That's for me to say," the sheriff pronounced gravely, suddenly become officious. "Do you know, Dale, that the ranch foreman, Ike Weeks, is layin' out there in the arroyo with a knife hole through his back—murdered?"

"No!" Dale exclaimed.

"Yes, for a fact. Puts you in a funny spot, too, Dale."

"Don't you lay it onto Dale!" Toughy exclaimed. "He hasn't been here."

"I'm not layin' it onto nobody—yet," Erskine said, looking like an owl. "But I've got to do my duty and go cautious here. Now where's everybody?"

"You mean," Dale asked, "the cowboys and Miss Wanda and all? I wouldn't know. The place was empty when I came here, and I haven't seen a soul till you showed up. But that dog— Say, where's old Rex?"

REX was gone. Dale believed now that the dog had known that a dead man lay in that arroyo when he first howled.

"Say," Dale told Erskine, "on my way in late yesterday, I caught sight of some hombre just as our car topped a rise. He ducked into the brush, though, and I never could see him again."

"And you didn't investigate?" Erskine almost accused.

"No, I was comin' home, and I'm not a sheriff. I can show you his tracks."

"All right, you better."

Erskine left two men at the house and took Dale and the others up the road. They got into the sheriff's car where the road was washed out, and drove the rest of the way to the very juniper behind which Dale had seen the man duck. Dale identified the juniper beyond doubt because he remembered it had a horseshoe hanging on a dead limb next to the road.

But there wasn't a man's track to be found near the tree, nor in the road. Dale got down close and searched the ground foot by foot where he'd seen the man. It had rained very

hard not 48 hours before, as the little washed-up beds of needles and juniper berries showed. Soft as the ground still was, though, not one imprint of a man's boots could be seen. But Dale, long a good trailer, read the true story.

That man had come back and carefully brushed out every track he'd left. Dale could make out faint traces of the imprints in a few places, but these had been covered over painstakingly with grass and dry dust from beneath cliffs, until only the most expert eye could read the story.

"Phooey!" Erskine exclaimed when Dale tried to show him the sign. "Try to make me out a fool, huh? If there's any fresh sign there at all, it could've been made by an unshod horse or even a bear or lion. Sergeant, you better watch your step."

Erskine was a man who made snap judgments quickly and then clung to them tenaciously. He took Dale back to the ranch house.

"How long does it look like Weeks has been dead?" Dale asked.

"How'd I know?" Erskine countered. "I never saw a murdered man before."

"Let's take a look, Dale," Toughy suggested. "You've seen lots of dead men."

"When did you leave the ranch?" Dale asked Toughy.

"Before noon yesterday."

"Was Ike Weeks here then—alive?"

"I don't know. I'm worried about Wanda."

"Did she know you were coming to see me?" Erskine demanded.

"No, I didn't tell her. She told me to go out to the roundup and take 'em some canned cow, and I got to thinking she wanted rid of me and the canned milk was only an excuse to send me off."

"Sheriff," Dale said, "we better examine the body and the whole place."

Erskine exclaimed, "But I'll do the examining, Sergeant! You better plunk yourself down and see if you can remember any more you haven't told me yet."

Erskine blundered about and a couple of deputies stayed near Dale when he went back to dress. Then Dale attempted to go down to the arroyo, but Erskine stopped him. That brought a surge of rebellion leaping into Dale's heart. A sheriff as cumbersome as this one might never find the murderer unless the evidence was like a nose on a face. Erskine, he could see, was likely to conclude blindly that Dale had done it and then do everything in his power to prove Dale guilty. . . .

WHILE Dale fretted, he saw a white spot show among the piñons on a ridge. Then a girl rode into view behind old Rex. It was as though the dog had gone after Wanda Griffin. Before she got up

"No, but I thought he was out on the roundup. He should've been. He was shorthanded, and the beef steers have to be delivered to the shipping pens in just 11 days—mighty little time for so long a work."

"Then," Dale said, "Weeks must have known something was wrong here at the ranch and came to see about it. Somebody got him then. Where's the roundup camp, Toughy?"

"Out at Red Mule Tank."

"Think maybe your sister is out there with the cowboys?"

to the ranch Sheriff Erskine walked up from the arroyo with a hard look on his face.

He said, "Whoever done it thinks he's smart. Never left a clue. But I'll git 'im. You can't outsmart old Sheriff Erskine."

"Then," Dale said, "that means you'll stop accusing me of it."

"I never once said you done it," Erskine flared, frowning at him. "But I figure you know the man what did, and you're shieldin' him, and I won't stand for no such tomfoolery. You know what this kid thinks?" and Erskine jerked his head toward Toughy.

"Sh-sh!" Toughy warned, flashing his brilliant dark eyes toward the approaching girl.

Dale had never seen Wanda Griffin before. He just stood there and stared at her until she dropped from her horse and looked with distressed eyes at the sheriff and all the solemn deputies and then at Dale. She was as slender as a whiplash and her figure made her black hat and red shirt look as if they'd come from Fifth Avenue. She had on plain bibless overalls, short-topped boots and light leather chaps that had seen a lot of riding.

But it was her face that Dale kept staring at. It was slender and fragile and yet it had a lot of healthy, modern girl in it. A reddish tinge gave her black eyes a warm, soft glow.

She spoke to Erskine and the others and Dale thought her little smile was forced. But what exquisite teeth it revealed. And any smile on such lips was sunny and warming. All at once Dale knew that he was frightfully woman-hungry. Had been for a long time and just didn't know it.

"Oh, you're Dale!" she said, as if she'd noticed him for the first time.

She smiled again and came toward him, hand outstretched. Dale found himself holding onto the little hand and looking into the brimming dark eyes as if he were afraid this one look would be all he'd ever get of her. At the same time he knew that she was scared. She was just a kid trying to bluff her way through this thing—whatever it was that she was hiding.

Dale remembered again the fragrance that his nostrils had caught in his old room when he'd walked into it. He thought of his picture on her table and wondered now how it came to be there.

She belonged here all right. As soon as he'd told his dad about his intention to enlist in the August before Pearl Harbor his father had begun negotiations for a partner on the ranch. Hub Hutchinson had been getting old and he'd been bothered a lot with his heart. His other son Eddie, didn't like the ranch. So, a month after Dale left, John Griffin came to the Cross J as fullfledged partner. He had two adult sons who'd help, besides Toughy and Wanda.

It had looked like a good arrangement. But when the Japs struck Pearl Harbor the two Griffin boys promptly joined the Navy. John Griffin himself, veteran sailor of World War I, forgot all about growing cattle and tried to volunteer with his boys. Border-line disabilities combined with his age of 46 to keep him out, but he made the Merchant Marine.

That left the short-handed ranch solely to Hub Hutchinson again. Overwork killed him. Wanda had been forced to put blustery, hot-tempered Ike Weeks in charge of the ranch, and although experienced, Weeks had little ability.

The Hutchinson half of the ranch actually belonged to Dale at this moment. His father had left it all to him in his will. To Eddie, Hub Hutchinson had willed the money Griffin had paid for his half-interest in the Cross J.

As soon as Dale could get a furlough after landing on the Coast, he'd come home to help the girl out. Also, he'd come because something bothered him. His brother Eddie had been a bomber pilot. A month ago he'd crashed in a big bomber over there in the lava beds, just after buzzing this house where Wanda was. Something about that crash kept haunting Dale. Ten men had been aboard the bomber, but just nine bodies had been found in and about the charred wreckage. Only five of the bodies had been identified definitely, Eddie's not among them.

"Now, Toughy," Erskine broke in upon Dale's first words to Wanda, "let's hear it again. Didn't you say that you figured there was some funny business going on around here?"

TOUGHY looked at Wanda with quick hurt. He was loyal to her, and yet the boy had been so distressed that he had gone over her head and appealed to the sheriff when he got no satisfaction from her. Dale saw a mist come to Toughy's eyes which he quickly tried to brush away.

"Goshamighty, Wanda," he said, "I never dreamed it would be this bad."

"Miss Griffin," Erskine demanded, "where did you spend the night?"

The girl hadn't expected that bull's-eye question. Dale saw her quick confusion.

"Why, out at the roundup camp, four miles from here," she declared.

But her hesitation had been just enough to betray her embarrassment. With a motion of his big puffy hand, Erskine led them all into the kitchen and waved at the table with its unfinished meal.

"Tell me, girl," Erskine fired at her, "who them men was that quit a meal like that so sudden they overturned one cup of Java."

Dale saw Wanda staring at the table and he could tell that she was trembling inside.

"Come on, spit it out!" Erskine blustered at her.

"I don't know who it was," she said.

"Don't tell me you was out at the roundup while that meal was cooked," Erskine boomed, well aware he was hitting her hard. "Toughy, didn't you tell me you slipped away when she started such a big meal, and that you hid and seen two men slippin' into the place?"

Toughy cast an imploring look at Wanda. "Yes, I did," he said. "But I was afraid they had something on Wanda, and that's why I high-tailed it after help. Wanda wouldn't cook for a bunch of deserters or outlaws or no crooks, if she could help it."

"Of course I wouldn't," Wanda vowed, grasping at the straw Toughy threw her. "I couldn't help myself."

"Who was they?" Erskine demanded.

"Just a bunch of toughs passing through," Wanda answered.

"It don't add up that way," Erskine retorted. "You're hidin' something, girl. Howcome all four men to leave their meal half finished?"

"Because we saw Mr. Weeks was coming to the house," she answered, "and they were afraid of him."

"And so one of them stuck a knife through his back, eh?" Erskine cried triumphantly. "Weeks lays over there in the arroyo—dead. Murdered!"

Dale expected to see Wanda start in horror at the news, but she didn't move. Not even her eyes widened in surprise. She just went as pale as death itself and her lip trembled ever so slightly. Dale felt himself go a little sick inside. He saw that she had known all along that Weeks had been killed. What sinister power had hold of this girl, entangling her in what vicious mesh?

Erskine also saw that she had known. He croaked, "So it's no news to you, eh?"

"I knew it," she admitted, hardly above a whisper.

"Then who killed him?" Erskine growled.

"I wish I knew," she said.

"Don't try to woolgather me," Erskine said. "You know and I'm takin' you to jail and holdin' you as a accomplice in the crime."

"No, no," Wanda cried, her eyes widening in fear, "you can't take me to jail!"

"I can and will—unless you talk," Erskine told her.

"I tell you I don't know who did it!" she cried.

Erskine fumbled out a pair of handcuffs. He glanced at his men, and Dale thought the overstuffed fellow looked for admiration from his deputies for the adept way he was handling this young woman.

"Stick them little paws out," he ordered Wanda.

SLOWLY she forced her hands to come up before her, but in the lovely dark eyes was all the horror that would have been there had she been forced to offer her hands to a coiled snake. Then all at once she broke.

"No, no, I can't go to jail like this!" she cried.

She whirled with the last words and leaped away. But not out the kitchen door, nor through the living room door. Deputies had these guarded. Wanda vaulted through the open window so agilely that not one of the men had time to lay a hand on her. That put her in the back kitchen yard, onto which not a door opened. She hit the ground running.

Two jammed the window trying to get through. Others raced out the door and around the end of the house. Dale ran out with them.

Wanda reached the horse which she had ridden to the house. Like a girl rider in a rodeo relay race, she flung herself into the saddle and lashed the horse away. Erskine yelled, "Stop, woman, or I'll shoot you outa the saddle!"

Erskine jabbed his Winchester up. Dale did not know in that crucial moment whether Erskine meant to shoot at her or not. The excited sheriff might at least shoot her horse and so send her down in a perilous spill.

"No, Erskine, don't do it!" Dale shouted.

Erskine's thumb jerked the hammer back. Dale leaped in and slapped the rifle muzzle toward the earth as it blazed. The next instant his fingers tightened on the octagon barrel and he was wresting the rifle from Erskine's hands with a quick, skilled movement he'd learned as part of Jap fighting.

Dale had meant only to disarm the sheriff because the officer might endanger the girl. Before he could tell the deputies this, however, three of them were rushing him. A fourth was dancing around, Colt in hand, trying to get where he could fire at Dale without endangering his fellow officers.

Dale leaped backward from the rushing men and whipped the rifle down onto them. He got the trio between him and the man with the six-shooter. Toughy raced from the house just then with his own .22 caliber Winchester repeating rifle.

"Let Dale be or you'll fight me, too," he cried.

The other deputies stood stock still for a moment, uncertain what to do. They were staring at that cool, dead-pan fighting face of Dale Hutchinson. It was a face that many a Jap had not liked at close, desperate quarters. The three men stopped short. The six-shooter fell from the hand of its owner.

"I don't want to kill anybody here," Dale said, "but I'll do it before you'll shoot that girl."

"I wasn't goin' to shoot no girl!" Erskine roared at him. "Put that gun down, Hutchinson, before we blow you to pieces."

"I'll put it down when you agree to listen to reason," Dale told him. "This case has got beyond you, Erskine. Why don't you go call in the FBI if you think there are deserters or draft dodgers in on this deal?"

"I can handle my own cases!" Erskine yelled. ""You're under arrest, Hutchinson. You'll rot in jail for this."

"That's just what I'm afraid of," Dale replied. "I'll let the law take its course just as soon as I've proved that neither that girl nor I had anything to do with this murder."

"Sheriff," Toughy put in, "you know I'm square, and I'm with Dale and Wanda. Now you let Dale be or—well, this little old rifle'll pepper some awful mean holes around over your carcass if you don't listen to sense."

"Well, all right, then," Erskine promised. "I'll give you your chance, Hutchinson. Put that gun down."

Dale read in the man's voice nothing but a yielding to expediency. Erskine would try to get the upper hand at the first opportunity.

"Give me just 48 hours, Erskine," Dale laid down his terms. "If by then I haven't uncovered your killer for you, I'll start for your jail steps to give myself up."

"All right, that's a go," Erskine agreed again.

"Can I depend on it?" Dale insisted.

"Yes, you can."

"Toughy," Dale called, "go saddle us a couple of horses. Fetch them here—"

"There's not even a wranglin' horse left in the corrals," Toughy cut in. "We'll have to hoof it, Dale. But we'll all be equal. The sheriff came in a car, and he can't catch mounts."

Toughy came out from the house carrying his father's old six-shooter that had been hanging on the wall of his bedroom ever since John Griffin left for the Merchant Marine.

"You'll look more natural dressed in this old hog-leg, Dale," Toughy said. "Great white-bearded grasshoppers—me and you sorta outlaws together, Dale, old boy!" Toughy's eyes were afire with excitement. Then he added soberly, "But I don't like the idea of my sis bein' outlawed along with us. That's something for us both to work on, Dale."

Then Toughy proved what a man's head he had on him. He stepped up boldly to Sheriff Erskine.

"Did anybody ever tell you that you look right much like a big overstuffed Jap?" he demanded. "You make Dale mad enough, and he might forget that he's not on Tarawa Island and go to work on you, paunch and all."

Erskine flung Dale a searching look, as though he might have been forgetting to allow for the fact that he was up against a man skilled in warfare.

"Dale," Toughy lamented, "it sure is a dirty shame that before you can come home to rest, you got to fight for a beachhead to land on—right here on your own home range."

WITH little further ado, Dale got away from the officers. He hated to leave the premises without a thorough look around, but that would have been difficult with Erskine ready to pounce upon him. Anyway, Dale believed that the murder of Weeks was more likely to be solved through people than by additional clues. He and Toughy backed away from the officers,

dropped over into a deep dry wash and ran up it as fast as Dale's limp would permit.

Where the wash came to an abrupt head, they peered out. Neither Erskine nor men had shown themselves over the little ridge between them and the house. Dale and Toughy struck off south, as though heading for the roundup camp at Red Mule Tank.

"Got any idea," Dale asked Toughy, "where these strangers might be holed up? I mean the ones that come to the house and left the dinner half eaten."

"There's just one place for them," Toughy declared. "You know that as well as I do."

"The lava beds?"

"Sure, and that's where Wanda will head as soon as she thinks she has everybody off the track. But don't get Wanda wrong, big boy. She's okay. But they've got her messed up somehow and she can't help herself. That's what I figured all along when I went to get the sheriff. But if I'd known you were coming, I never would've called in that Erskine. Wouldn't anyway, if I'd known he was such a fathead."

"Well, we better swing on south to the roundup, then try to cut Wanda's trail west to the lava beds."

"Okay, pard. Say, Dale, how many Japs do you reckon you put the kibosh on?"

"Oh, hard to tell if I got any, Toughy. You see, a fellow over there doesn't often have time to stop and count up how many spuds he's peeled or how many shots he fires. Things happen too quickly."

"Oh, boy! Do you reckon the war'll last till I can get in?"

"Hope not."

"Tired of hoofin' it, Dale?"

"Not yet."

"Well, if we're lucky, we'll find old Nubbins, my burro, over the next hill. He located there when we fetched him in three years ago. We can wrangle a coupla horses on old Nubbins."

They got the horses within the next mile. Then they went on to the southwest until they topped a ridge and saw the roundup herd some two miles away. The sight tugged at Dale's heart. A thousand cattle thrown together at the bunchin' ground at the tank windmill. Cowboys swinging here and there as they worked the herd. Dust in the air. The bawl of cows and calves coming faintly to his ears. Smoke rising from the rusty stovepipe of the little 'dobe shack beside the windmill. That would be one of the boys getting supper.

Dale spurred faster for the roundup. Not because he was so homesick for it, but because he was anxious to ask the cowboys a few questions.

They all were new men, old fellows. All the former hands were gone to war. Every one, though, knew Dale and shook his hand warmly and looked gravely at the scar on his face and the limp in his right leg.

"Boys," Dale soon was asking, "did Wanda spend the night here last night?"

"Yeah," peg-legged Andy Hoke answered, "but she lit out about daylight."

"Was she—ah, natural? Or bothered?"

"Wasn't herself, hardly, Dale. Why, what's the matter?"

"When did you boys last see Ike Weeks?"

"Yestidy. He left here—oh, say, one or 1:30. Right after dinner, anyway. Had to go into the ranch and on to town for some more blackleg serum. One o' the boys spilled half what we had. Lookin' for 'im back any minute now."

So Wanda had known while she was here that Weeks was dead, and yet she hadn't spread the alarm.

"What about Ike?" another veteran hand spoke up. "You see 'im?"

"Nope, I haven't seen him," Dale answered, "but he's been murdered."

"Not Ike Weeks?" Andy Hoke cried. "Then they'll be a lynchin' around here!"

"Where? What about it?" someone else asked.

Dale had a hard time assuring the four old fellows that Erskine was handling the case and they needn't take the law into their own hands. He left them in a few minutes, all still vowing that Ike Weeks was going to be avenged. . . .

ON THE edge of the lava some hours later, Dale paused and looked at Toughy. A kid not yet thirteen had no business off in that weird world at any time. Especially not tonight. There was time left for Toughy to make it back to the ranch by late bedtime.

"I know what you're thinkin', Dale," Toughy spoke up. "But it's no sale. I'm not crawfishin' one wiggle. If that's the way she went, then I'm going that way too."

Toughy nodded down at what sign they'd found where the grass quit and the black wall

of malpais took off. There was a piece of orange peel showing yellow against the black. Wanda liked oranges and she carried them when out riding on the waterless range. Also, a horse had been ridden up to the lava but not away from it. That meant Wanda had forced her mount out onto the lava as far as she could, no doubt with the idea of concealing the mount somewhere within the lava itself.

Here the surface of the lava lay glazed over somewhat, but at best a rider risked a horse's legs or life when he took the animal a hundred yards across the tar-hued rock. It could be done, especially if the rider knew of some huge crack in the lava with the accumulation of centuries of dust and vegetation decay at the bottom to form a trail wide enough for shod hoofs.

"Just where did that bomber fall, Toughy?" Dale asked.

"See that little peak off yonder? Land peak, I mean, not lava, like it was an island in the ocean?"

Dale nodded toward the odd upthrust of land above the lava.

"Somewhere south of it, down in a big hollow in the lava. The Army wouldn't let me go in with the rescue crew—like I still was a baby. But I went in myself in a few days."

"How does it look?"

"The bomber? All burned and smashed and warped."

"They carried out the bodies?"

"Oh, yes—but all burned till they couldn't tell who was who."

"We better leave our horses hid in the first big crack we can locate," Dale said, "and take to this stuff afoot."

While they were tying the mounts, Toughy exclaimed under his breath. "Look, Dale—Rex!"

The white police dog trotted down over the lava and came up to Toughy, panting. He didn't growl at Dale this time.

"That means Wanda isn't far away from here," Toughy declared. "Let's hurry. Go back to her, Rex, old boy. Hurry, go on."

Toughy ran up across the lava, encouraging the dog. Rex led out over a high ridge. In its cooling period the lava often had pushed up to form ridges two or three hundred feet above the general level. It was ropy, gnarled, writhing stuff as black as pitch. Piñons, grass, rabbit-bush and shrubs grew up from cracks and level spots in the older flows, while the new flows only a few hundred years old were as bare as last night's firecoals. This great black malpais sea ran for 50 miles north and south and averaged 15 miles wide.

Into it Dale and Toughy followed Rex. The white dog was easy to see against the malpais. Now and then Rex detoured to get across some deep break. Dale and Toughy had to zigzag back and forth when blocked by crevasses thirty feet deep or by huge pits called blisters.

Half a mile in the malpais Toughy caught sight of Rex coming back toward them, tail tucked.

"Look, Dale," Toughy exclaimed. "Wanda must've just scolded old Rex and driven him back.

Rex was several hundred yards ahead of them, on the rim of the largest blister they had yet encountered. Beyond the blister rim there must have been open land untouched by lava, for there the piñon, pines and rabbit-bush grew thick. Rex stopped his retreat and looked back into the timber. He wagged his tail a little, as though testing the severity of the reprimand he had received.

Then suddenly Rex tensed, bristled and rushed toward the piñon growth. The next instant there came a girl's terrified scream. Rex was barking in a rage. The girl screamed again, but her outcry this time was smothered. Rex let out a yelping howl, as though he had been struck.

DALE was already plunging down over the blister wall. It was 20 feet to the floor of the blister. He almost fell down over the jagged, irregular wall. He cut his hands and legs and ripped his shoes and clothes. It pained his lame leg distressingly when he had to drop the last length of himself and land in a jumble of small sharp edges.

Limping still more, he bounded across the floor of the blister—here nothing but a mass of malpais from fist-sized pieces to chunks as large as box-cars. Toughy, unable to make it down over the wall, was racing around the rim with twice as far to go.

Climbing the far side of the wall was an ordeal. It was not straight up but the edges of the malpais were so sharp and jagged that they cut like knives if too much weight were put against them. No more cries came from Wanda; even Rex was silent now.

Dale was near the top finally. His hands

were bleeding, his legs cut in several places. He shifted sideways, tiptoed to reach another ledge and pulled himself up to the rim. Just as he came erect, a six-shooter barrel jabbed out at him from a big piece of malpais.

Dale froze cold. Behind the gun was a head and face to make any man stop. The man was so blond with such blond hair he had a frosty hue. Even his eyelashes were white. While he wasn't yet of middle age, there were deep, hard lines cutting down across his thin, long face. Dale recognized him as Frosty Vernon, the man Sheriff Erskine had named.

"Reach!" the man said.

Dale had never heard so deep, sullen a voice. It was so cold it made him shiver. He knew this man would kill as readily as any Jap he ever faced.

Yet Dale was thinking only of Wanda's scream of terror. It had come from the piñons just beyond. To surrender now meant she would be left to the mercy of this man and confederates, whoever they might be. Toughy could not be expected to help much.

The piece of malpais behind which the man crouched was like a block, three foot high and four or five wide. Dale was within ten feet of the block. By diving straight toward it and falling to the ground, he would pass for a second beyond the blond man's aim—if the devil didn't shoot before Dale could make that desperate dive. If Dale made it to the ground unharmed, the man would have to stand up in order to see over the block and get a new aim on him.

"Reach!" the man ordered a second time, and in the deep, sullen voice was sharp impatience.

Dale wondered if the fellow could be sidetracked just for a second. He said, "If I run to your right, Frosty, it'll be harder for you to follow me with your gun muzzle and make a quick kill. Here goes!"

WITH his last word, Dale dived to Vernon's left. Frosty Vernon fired. But Dale's mental sparring helped; Vernon's bullet cut high and to the right. Dale hit the hard malpais and his six-shooter was leaping from its holster. Upward it swung too fast for the eye to follow.

But Vernon had been too smart to leap up and bend over the block of malpais for a second shot, after he missed that first one. He saw instantly that he was up against a reckless fighting man who'd kill before he could shoot again. He simply jerked his head down too fast for Dale to get it.

There the two men lay, one on one side of the block and one on the other. For a moment Dale couldn't hear a move out of the man. He was keyed to move at a fraction of a second. Let Vernon only try to bob up and shoot!

But Vernon was cunning. He knew he could wait it out, and Dale couldn't because Wanda's cries had told him she needed help desperately. Dale had to get to her. He decided that he'd toss a piece of malpais to one side, hoping again to distract Vernon's attention. Then he'd bob up over the block and shoot it out with him.

Dale crouched for the break; picked up a small piece of malpais. Measured the distance

over the corner of the block, listened, tensed for the leap.

Just then, though, Rex's white form glided from beneath a gnarled old piñon that had managed to live hundreds of years there where life was so hard. The dog was crouched low like his kinsman the wolf, his long thin muzzle outstretched and his bristles on end. Blood smeared the white shoulder of Rex, where he had been struck by a sharp piece of malpais.

Vernon must have seen the dog. He yelled at it, "Git back there, you white devil before you get it, too!"

Dale shouted, "Take 'im, Rex! Take 'im!"

That was his old shout to Rex, from the days when they'd hunted coyotes and mountain lions together. The words must have stirred in the dog's memory instantly. Rex

let out a snarl and charged for Vernon, fangs bared.

Vernon had to stop that charge and yet he knew that to turn and fire at Rex left him exposed to a shot from Dale. Perhaps already in Vernon's heart fear of the fighting Marine had chilled his nerve and his decisions were harder to make.

Vernon did the only thing a scared man could do when he yelled, "Stop that dog, Hutchinson! I'm surrenderin' quick. See, my hands're empty!"

Vernon jabbed his hands above his head and leaped up so Dale could see he was surrendering. Rex came on like a streak of white. Vernon jumped up on the malpais block. Dale didn't know whether he could stop the dog or not. If Rex only remembered his old commands and would obey!

was trying to take advantage of the instant's attention Dale gave to the dog and girl.

But the Marine sergeant was used to tricky enemies. He didn't dodge, step back—or try to mix it with Vernon. As Vernon crashed at him, hands clutching, Dale's right hand slapped his six-shooter against the side of Vernon's head so fast the man never saw it coming. Vernon was out like a shot fuse and Dale let him collapse into the malpais.

Dale glanced at the motionless form just once, to make sure that Vernon had been put to sleep. Then he broke into a run for the brushy area beyond.

Rex already was leading the way through the piñon and cedar, where the timber gave way suddenly to a wild black jumble of lava. Rex charged into the small, narrow mouth of a cave. The next instant Dale saw the dog

Dale shouted, "Down, Rex! Down! Down, boy!"

Rex was within lunging distance of Vernon, but the deep voice of the Marine sergeant carried authority. Rex stopped, poised, quivering. A throaty growl proclaimed him ready to attack even yet.

Just then, though, Rex's head whipped back toward the brush. Dale heard it, too. Another cry from the girl, but much fainter, as though partly smothered. That didn't give Dale time to lash Vernon's hands behind his back, but he couldn't leave a dangerous killer like this on the loose.

Vernon solved the problem for him. Rex whirled and started back toward the spot from which Wanda had cried. Like a tiger suddenly gone crazy, Vernon whipped himself about and lunged down upon Dale. He

fall downward. There was a crevasse just inside the cave entrance and poor Rex, attention on the enemy, had plunged into it.

Dale started to enter the cave, regardless of the danger of enemies and the crevasse. As he bent low to find the way over the opening, he caught sight of a man's boots and legs in the dim light just beyond the five-foot crevasse. That man was waiting for him, itchy finger on trigger. Dale fired at the feet just as they were jerked away. He was afraid he missed.

IT WAS certain death to try to enter that opening by way of the two-foot ledge at one side. Yet he had to go in. He fell back upon his lifelong knowledge of the malpais. He didn't know this particular cave, of course, but he did know freakish things were as

thick in the lava as fleas on a Makin monkey. These caves were freakish things themselves, sometimes with several entrances.

Dale ran up onto the lava and searched frenziedly for a second cave mouth. He found another entrance, but it led into a separate cave no larger than a bathroom. He ran out and raced over the lava again. There was a yawning crack which disappeared beneath the lava and pointed downward in the general direction toward the first cave. He slid down into it, not knowing whether or not he could climb back up the steep, nearly smooth break.

A cold, chilly wind struck him in the face. He hurried into the blackness of the crevasse. It was mighty rough going when he no longer could see. He paused and listened. Human sounds came faintly to him. Regardless of cut feet and legs, he pushed deeper into the darkness.

A whirring, zipping sound made him start. Rattlesnakes! Four or five of them were telling him to get back out of their black, secret world. In the lava beds the diamondbacks sometimes grew as thick as a man's upper arm. But Dale couldn't turn back. He heard Wanda cry faintly, "They'll hang you for this, Matt Foley!"

"Catchin's before hangin', Foley retorted.

Dale knew he couldn't hear them even faintly if some sort of opening didn't exist between his crevasse and the cave. He could find it only by sound. Stumbling, hands outstretched, he tried to dodge around the rattlers and reach the wall which was still between him and the imperiled girl.

He had to feel every step with his feet, so as not to plunge downward into some new crack or hole, as Rex had done. He thought sometimes he could hear the dog's smothered bark. Rex was still trying to get out of there.

Dale found that there was a crack leading straight into the cave where Wanda and Foley were, but it was so narrow a cat could hardly have crawled through it. Dale felt along the wall for a larger opening. He went the entire length and back again, and still found no hole of any kind. The sounds grew fainter on the other side each time he left the one narrow slit through the lava.

Desperate and completely balked, Dale felt that he had only one chance left. That was to fool them long enough so he could go back and enter the cave through the opening where he had shot at the man's feet.

Dale put his mouth close to the crack and suddenly called, "You didn't know this cave had another opening, Foley, did you? Turn the girl loose or I'm coming to get you."

In the pitch darkness there was dead silence for a moment. Then the man Foley barked sharply, "Come here quick, Julian. He's sneaked in another way!"

FOLEY'S voice was shot through with consternation. He wanted help against this sudden unexpected enemy in the blackness. Dale didn't wait to hear the answer from the man Julian. He struck back the way he had come. The rattlers set up a louder buzzing.

"Just keep to your side and I'll keep to mine, boys," Dale thought.

He could smell the angry odor from the snakes—something to make a man sick in close quarters like that unless he'd been through tougher things before. Twice Dale stumbled and fell and cut his hands, but he kept on. He got out into daylight again, then ran to the place he'd slid down.

He had to set his back against one side of the crack and feet against the other, like a mountain climber going up a chimney in the Alps. But he made it. Then he sped for the single opening of the cave. He could hear Rex far down in the crevasse some place, but there was no sound or sight of the man left to guard the entrance, the fellow called Julian.

Dale tiptoed up to the entrance, holding back so his own feet and legs would not come into view of someone watching. Then he gathered himself and suddenly charged into the opening. He had only that narrow ledge at one side of the crevasse on which to pass. Any guard alert at the entrance could have fired straight down it and got him.

As he went in, he saw a flashlight snapped off. Two guns roared at him and the bullets whacked wickedly against the lava beside him. He didn't stop instantly to fire, because he feared he might be faintly outlined against the light of the opening. He stumbled and caught himself and stumbled again on the rough, irregular footing.

They didn't fire any more because the flashes of their guns would have made them targets for a quick shot. Dale quit running and began a slow, noiseless creep toward the men. He had his Colt cocked in his hand, lest they suddenly turn on the flashlight and spot him before he could fire. He heard just

an occasional scruff of feet and the grate of lava against lava as someone stepped onto loose pieces. They seemed to be moving away from him, deeper into the cave.

There is no black so black as that inside one of these malpais caves. The human eye couldn't make out even a snow man inches away. Dale wondered what had happened to the girl. She was making no new outcries; he couldn't hear a move out of her.

The men kept retreating deeper into the cave. Already the faint, occasional sounds said that they were back past the spot where Dale had heard Foley and Wanda through the crack. Dale followed them, very cautiously now. He knew one slip might mean his instant undoing. Those two men were as keen and whetted up as he, and more desperate. There might be more than this pair, for all he knew. His mind still probed for some more powerful man behind all this.

Once Dale stopped, every nerve atingle. He listened, held his breath. Not a sound broke the deathly stillness of the inky, tomblike place. There wasn't a move, not a whisper. Yet he got the clear, sure feel of the near presence of someone. Right there at him, too, within hand's reach if he dared put out a hand. Still there wasn't a breath to hear.

It grew eerie, unreal. He was more sure than ever, though, that some person was there before him, straining every sense just as he was.

Slowly, not daring to take another step lest a knee creak or the lava crunch beneath his feet, he leaned forward a foot. Two feet. Then suddenly he knew what it was—a faint, very faint lingering of the fragrance that had been in his old room when he went into it after his arrival.

ALMOST simultaneous with that realization a hand touched his hair. Two hands, tied together. They were groping, together. Strangely, though, he didn't jerk away from them or start.

From his hair the hands came down quickly to his face, found his mouth and covered it as if to say, "Don't even whisper." They were Wanda's small hands, and the very touch of them sent his blood racing through him crazily. For a moment both hands seemed to linger, one on each side of his face, as if they ached to take his face between them.

She seemed to be in doubt still, though. The hands left his lips and came down onto his shoulder, then to his arms. Her fingers lingered on his sergeant chevrons. Identification of the chevrons convinced her fully. The hands gave the arm a happy little pat.

Two things leaped into Dale's head. He must get away from her, so that if that flashlight suddenly stabbed the blackness, he wouldn't draw fire dangerously near to her. The two men had left her momentarily simply because dragging her with them would have betrayed their location.

Dale started to step away from her and move on in the strange, unreal stalk of the two men, but the hands caught at him, gripped his arm, pulled him back. He knew that she was trying to save him from the deadly battle that he was sure to stir up if he crowded the men on to the end of the cave.

The two small hands clung to him, wouldn't let him go. He realized all at once that he hadn't even untied her wrists. Quickly his fingers fumbled at the bandanna handkerchief which the men in their haste had used to bind her wrists none too securely.

Her hands came free. He started to go again, but again she caught him, both hands gripping one of his arms. She tugged him toward her just convulsively, perhaps just a trifle endearingly.

Not even now did Dale Hutchinson realize how terribly woman-hungry he was. Not just since he'd gone into the Marines, where a man hears woman talk every day of the year, in battle and out. But all his mature life, when seldom ever even a neighboring ranch woman came to the Cross J. All Dale knew at that moment was that she had hold of his arm, was tugging him toward her. That fragrance was in his nostrils again, tantalizingly strong.

The madness of her suddenly throbbed through him. With it came all the pent-up madness of those long, vicious months of battle. Even the madness of this battle impending here in the cave broke loose with the rest. He flung arms about her as rashly and crudely as a man of the caves might have done a hundred thousand years before.

He felt her slender, firm little body stiffen instantly in his grip. Through his head there beat the old inhibitions, crying, "Turn her loose, you poor heel! Do you think the whole world's gone crazy, including girls like her?"

But he couldn't turn her loose. His arms gripped tighter, more bearlike. And to add to his utter madness, the stiffness suddenly

melted from her and she was giving him her lips just as crazily as he was taking them. Her arms crept about his neck, began to hold him with all their sweet young strength.

Things pounded through his head in a crazy whirl. He couldn't remember them all yet they all swam dizzily in his consciousness. His picture on the table in her room, his old room. The two men waiting there in the blackness to kill him. Toughy and Vernon on the outside somewhere, and maybe more men. The dead man, Weeks, back in the arroyo and the 48 hours he had asked of Sheriff Erskine to clear the thing up. That crashing bomber and nine, not ten bodies found, and his brother's body not among those identified. Old Rex down in the crevasse, barking.

No, Rex was here, growling. Dale came back to realities. Rex somehow had got out of the trap, and now was just behind him and Wanda. The dog sucked in breath with a deep, throaty growl that rose in power and wrath. He stalked past Dale and Wanda, going after the two men again.

"Hey, Hutchinson," Foley's voice called, "stop that dog and clean out, and we'll call it a draw. Otherwise, we flash this light on and cut loose. That means the girl'll get it too."

THAT put the case succinctly enough. Dale didn't answer. He was afraid that if he did they might be all set to shoot at the sound of his voice. Rex growled more viciously, and Dale had an image of the dog crouched low, bristles up, long nose outthrust.

Foley implored, "Stop that brute, Hutchinson. We didn't mean the girl no harm. Just meant to hold her so we could make that brother of yours come across with the dough he has—60,000 bucks he had in that bomber when she crashed."

Dale wanted to snatch at the hope that Eddie was still alive, but he was afraid to speak. All this talk might be part of the trick. Eddie had been carrying $60,000 in that plane, though, and news that he was alive seemed reasonable since one body was missing from the bomber wreckage. But where had Eddie been all these 30 days?

The other man put in, "Quick, call the dog off or on goes the light—and all hell breaks loose."

Wanda took matters into her own hands. She gave a sharp, low whistle and said, "Rex, come here."

No bullets hunted them out. She had hold of Dale's hand, was moving back away from the other men. She tried to tug him with her. Dale stood his ground for a few seconds, unwilling to let the pair off so easily. But Wanda tugged harder, and he knew that he had no business forcing a fight he could avoid when she would be in the double danger of flying lead even if he won and of recapture by them if he lost the fight. He yielded to her pull, and they stole out of the cave together. Rex followed them but with many a snarl and growl and a turning about toward the men.

When they drew near the entrance, Dale whispered, "You go first and I'll cover. Watch that big crack."

"Yes, but you'll come?" her whisper implored.

"Be right on your heels," he promised.

He listened, to make sure they didn't rush up to get in shots as he and Wanda outlined themselves against the light. The pair didn't try anything. They seemed too glad to be rid of him and the dog.

Dale and Wanda slipped sideways as they cleared the cave mouth, and nothing happened behind them. Then they hurried into the cedars and piñon. Dale streaked it straight for where he had left Vernon on the malpais. As he went he yelled, "Hey, Toughy! Toughy!"

"Is he out here too?" Wanda exclaimed.

"Yes'm."

Toughy didn't answer. Dale knew the boy should have been around here before this.

And Vernon was gone! Rex told which way Vernon had gone when he rushed forward again, once more on the fight. Dale and Wanda followed the dog. All at once they seemed of another world again. Rather, they had come back to the world of reality. That one crazy, heavenly moment in the cave had not been of things real at all. They even avoided looking into each other's eyes or getting too near each other as they followed the dog.

REX led the chase for several hundred yards. Then it came to a momentary halt. Rex rushed up to the edge of a crevasse 50 feet deep and at least a dozen feet across. It lay gaping open that way for hundreds of yards in each direction. But on the far side was a dead piñon log that showed evidence of use only minutes before. Pieces of bark and worm dust lay on both sides of the rim. It was as clear as day that Vernon

had used the log as a footbridge for crossing the crevasse, and then pulled it over after him.

Hardly had they reached that conclusion when Vernon's forehead and eyes appeared from a shallow crack not 50 yards beyond the impassable one. Seeing them so near, Vernon called, "I've got the gal's kid brother here, all tied up. I want that girl, tied up too. We won't harm a hair of her head, if we get what we're after—which is the 60,000 berries Eddie Huchinson's got hid out in this lava some place."

Dale looked at Wanda. She'd been back and forth into this lava, and it all now seemed to come out as some crazy-quilt pattern. Her face flushed a violent red. Again Dale wondered who was wielding some dangerous power over her.

"Eddie does have the money hid out," she admitted. "He talked with me about it only yesterday, said they were after it."

"Where is Eddie?" Dale asked.

Her face flushed still hotter. "They had a camp hid away off out there," she said, motioning deeper into the malpais. "Another two or three miles to it."

"You mean Eddie was camped with these devils?" Dale asked incredulously.

Before she could answer, Vernon called. "Cut out the blah-blah between yourselves. Do what I say or this kid'll have an accident—fall down one of these cracks in the lava, and you'll be lucky ever to find the body."

"What do you want me to do?" Wanda asked Vernon, panic in her voice.

"Surrender to me, and Dale Hutchinson get back out of the malpais. You won't be hurt, for Eddie'll come across with the dough when he finds out you're a prisoner and threatened."

"Listen, Vernon," Dale said, "the sheriff is after you and your gang. The FBI will be after you, too. If you know what's healthy, you'll—"

"Aw, I didn't ask for advice," Vernon cut in sneeringly. "I know how dangerous clumsy old Erskine is. That's one reason I'm here. The other is that this lava can hide a man when a thousand are looking for him, and he won't even sweat about it. But with $60,000 I won't linger long in here, you can bet. Come on, woman, say you'll walk that log. And you, Hutchinson, turn around right now and move. You don't get the best of me twice inside of one hour. I'll kill this kid, yes, but what I beat you."

Dale glanced back the way they had come. He caught sight of Foley slinking through the brush. Jenkins would be with him. Dale had expected that they might trail him and Wanda, but not so soon. It just showed their desperation. Now they would have him and the girl in a pincers from front and rear.

Vernon saw this too. He said, "And you're not where you can get to any good cover. Hutchinson, even if you're fool enough to fight. I'll cut you down out there if you start anything."

Dale made an unexpected reply, "Looks like you've got me. Well, I tried anyway."

He turned and started back. He saw dismay flash into Wanda's face. Maybe it was more than that. She hadn't dreamed he would surrender so tamely, even with such odds stacked against him.

"Dale, are you quitting me?" she gasped. "I can't leave my brother here like this—unless I surrender."

There was a pitiful note in her voice, as if she'd been hurt deep inside.

"What else can I do?" Dale asked, loud enough for Vernon to hear.

"Shows your good sense," Vernon urged him. "You don't have a chance, and the girl will be sent home unharmed, with the kid too, after I get that 60 grand."

DALE saw Wanda's face blanch as he passed her. Saw the sudden scorn flame into her eyes. But he was not prepared for the quick, fiery words that she poured out at him.

"Well, you poor cheap coward!" she cried. "Where did you get those medals you got credit for—buy them at some pawn shop? Maybe Eddie was right. Maybe you were just lucky enough to catch some war correspondent's fancy and get the write-ups!"

Her words stung and burned, but Dale had a job to do. A desperate, foolhardy job. He needed every break that cunning and audacity would give him. Let Vernon hear her scorn. Let him think he'd won hands down.

Dale was estimating his distance away from the crevasse. A trained athlete, he knew, could long-jump 21 feet readily on a course planned to give him every advantage and when he was stripped down. But a man in army shoes, with a limp in his leg—could he race across broken rough malpais and clear 12 feet from an uncertain take-off, with death

looking up at him from the bottom of the crevasse? With death spitting at him from a gun 50 yards away?

There was just one way to find out. Dale suddenly whirled, raced for the crevasse. Wanda, startled, unbelieving, looked at him with pretty lips half open and consternation in her eyes. Then she saw what he meant to do when he was at the very brink of the crevasse.

"Oh, Dale," she screamed, "I didn't mean it! I couldn't have. I love you!"

He heard the last words as his foot caught the sharp edge of the malpais. Then he was launched into the air, flying across that black chasm, eyes for an instant on the other edge where he hoped to land. His whole being was tensed, as if by some inner force he would try to get extra inches into that leap.

He heard Vernon's gun roar. Heard the bullet crack past him. Heard an enraged scream from Wanda, "Don't you kill him, Vernon, or you'll die for it! Don't shoot again. I'll surrender, Vernon!"

Dale reached out with his feet, caught the edge of the lava. But he wasn't quite there yet. The rest of his body was unbalanced, about to topple backwards. He waved his arms frantically, trying to recover balance. Then he crumpled down and caught at the lava's edge, rather than plunge backward.

His right fingers caught into some break, held. He jerked himself up onto the lava. Vernon's gun spoke again, but this time the bullet must have gone wilder. Dale leaped up and raced for the killer.

Then he saw what was happening in the narrow slit where Vernon had hid. Toughy, tied and gagged, still was not out of things entirely. The kid was on his feet and butting his head into Vernon to destroy his aim. Vernon tried to kick him away so he could fire again. But Toughy was too tough. He butted Vernon again. Then Vernon swung his gun around at Toughy. Dale feared instantly that Vernon was going to shoot the boy to get rid of him. But Toughy was boring into the man, trying to drive him off his feet.

The two went down together into the crack, disappearing from Dale's view. Dale heard Vernon's six-shooter fire. No gun ever had sounded so horrible to him before. Dale was running so hard he didn't even show a limp now.

Dale swerved his course and rushed up to the edge of the crack. Vernon was on his back, expecting him but looking for him to come straight on. Toughy lay to one side, blood flowing from his side. Vernon had to swing his gun off its set aim, because Dale had fooled him by that quick swerve. Dale fired and Vernon's gun arm fell. The gun went off, but only because Vernon gave it a death squeeze.

Dale saw that Toughy was unconscious, but he couldn't stop for him that instant. He whirled, ran back to the crevasse, jerked up the dead piñon, stood its butt on the edge and eased it down in its fall so it wouldn't break in two when the small top end hit the opposite brink.

WHILE he was doing that Wanda was moaning, "Oh, Dale, is Toughy dead? What a fool I've been!"

"Walk this log, and don't make a misstep," Dale tried to soothe her.

Wanda knew how to walk a log correctly by turning her feet sideways so that the insteps hugged the wood with each step. Even so, her haste and excitement were too much. She lost her balance, collapsed and fell down to the log. But she caught the dead piñon and managed to arrest her fall.

Dale couldn't help her. He had to stand there and keep his gun on Foley and Jenkins, who already were within long pistol range. Wanda regained her composure and crawled the rest of the way across.

They ran back to Toughy. The boy had received only a shallow side wound in the one shot which Vernon got turned into him. But Vernon had struck him with the six-shooter and knocked him out. While Dale and Wanda worked over the lad, they kept peering over the edge of the crack at Foley and Jenkins. That pair shifted their course and pretended to be looking for a place further away, where they could cross the crack.

"They wouldn't cross if they could, Dale," Wanda said. "They're too afraid of you. They're not fighters anyway. Foley is a low-down draft-dodger and Jenkins a deserter from the Army. That kind don't hunt a fight. Vernon was different. He was an outlaw. Oh, Dale, how ashamed I am! Calling you a coward, after all you've done against the Japs. And me hobnobbing with men like these. But I did it for your brother's sake, Dale. Eddie's worth saving."

"Where is Eddie?" Dale asked.

"I was to meet him at five o'clock today, at a certain spot. I'll take you there with me."

"What's Eddie doing out in here like this anyway? Why hasn't he reported back to his post?"

A strange look flashed into her dark eyes. Dale hardly knew what it was. Pity, maybe. Maybe the mother in her coming to the fore.

"Dale, don't be too hard on Eddie," she said. "He was thrown clear of the plane when it crashed, stunned and badly bruised but otherwise not seriously hurt. He was out for hours, but he wandered for two or three miles from the wreck. When he came to, he still had that $60,000 hugged under his arm. Somehow, out though he was, he'd kept the money with him in a brief case. He hid it, and then he happened to find their camp and got his injuries dressed."

"Whose camp?"

"I hate to tell you, Dale. Foley and Jenkins were teamed up with Frosty Vernon and one Karl Mann. Mann is an escaped war prisoner. A German captain. Before Eddie knew it, they had him in with them."

"That doesn't make sense, an American officer in with a draft dodger, a deserter, an outlaw and a German prisoner of war."

"But that crash broke his nerve. He came to the house and told me so, and I've been trying to get him back ever since."

DALE looked stunned, just shook his head. Dale Hutchinson could understand no loss of nerve, no war nerves, shock or terror that would turn a real man into a cringing, frightened deserter and team him up with such men.

"And," Dale asked her finally, "that's how you let his little playmates come to our house? Fed them? Shielded them?"

His face was dark. The tone of his voice was accusing her, condemning her and his brother along with the others.

"But I was doing it to save him, Dale. Eddie was a swell kid before that crash. You must know that our War Department recognizes shell shock, or what they now call war fatigue, and understand that they're usually psychological cases that can be cured. Eddie is coming out of it. Don't condemn him before you talk to him."

"But war fatigue comes only in war," Dale said, "and sometimes even then I doubt that it's justified."

"Yes, you've been there, to real war," she agreed, "but be charitable toward Eddie."

"How about this gang? Howcome they just didn't kill him and take the money?"

"They didn't know he had it until the other day Eddie let it slip. Then they demanded that he split five ways with them. Eddie pretended to agree and go get the money. Instead, he hid out and slipped into the ranch after dark. He wanted me to give him supplies and bedding, so he could hide in the lava by himself a little longer. I sent him away with what I could rake together in a hurry. He hadn't been gone 15 minutes before the whole gang surrounded the house and then came in asking for him. I wouldn't tell them where to find him, and they got ugly."

"Harm you?" Dale put in.

"No, but I believe they would have carried me off then, for a pawn over Eddie's head, if Ike Weeks hadn't come in sight. They quit

Coming in the Second August Number

Range Legacy

A Swift-Paced Romantic Novel

By MARIE DE NERVAUD

their meal and slipped out the back way. As soon as I could get Mr. Weeks off guard, I followed them. I wanted to make some sort of bargain with them so they'd let Eddie alone. I meant to keep them satisfied some way until Eddie could go back to the Army, then turn the whole gang in to the FBI."

"Who killed Weeks?"

"That's just it, I don't know. When I followed the four men out the back way, I missed them somehow. They'd scattered, from the sign I saw. When I got back to the arroyo, I found Mr. Weeks dead."

"Then why didn't you go for the sheriff or the FBI?"

"I couldn't until I was sure Eddie wouldn't get turned in as a deserter. I hoped he'd go back and report for duty and they'd let him off maybe because of shock. So I went to hunt him up and tell him what had happened and what he must do. I've got a date with him for five, and it's 3:30 now or better."

Dale didn't say any more. He set to work on Toughy again.

"Dale, don't you believe me?" she pleaded, as they worked over the boy. "Can't you understand?"

"No, I can't understand," he confessed. "It all stinks."

"And what I've done, too, Dale?" she cried, as if he'd hurt her bodily. "You class me with Foley and—"

"Look, the kid's coming to," he interrupted. "Attaboy, Toughy. There, that's a man, snap out of it."

Toughy blinked his eyes, then looked about, startled. In a moment he had his wits fully recovered.

"Now who says I'm not big enough to fight Japs?" he wanted to know. Then he looked down at the lifeless Vernon. "Did I kill that booger?" he cried jubilantly. "I was workin' him over the last thing I remember."

"You did the big share of it, pard," Dale assured him. Dale turned to Wanda. "This German, Karl Mann—what does he look like?"

"Tall and straight as a ramrod. Brown hair and grey eyes."

"And moves with a quick step, like he'd been used to gooseteppin'?" Dale asked.

"That's the one."

"And wore a brown sombrero and new overalls and walked a little like cowboy boots didn't set well with 'im?"

"Exactly."

"That's the jasper I saw dodge behind the juniper tree, and I've got a notion he's the one who went back and killed Weeks. What time was it Weeks was killed?"

"About 2:30, I'd say."

"And I saw Mann a little after three. That adds up."

"Toughy," Wanda said in a moment, "we've got to go meet Eddie now, and can't well start you back by yourself. You better go along with us."

"You better ask me and Dale if you can go along with us, Sis," Toughy retorted. "We're pards, Dale and me."

AFTER Dale, Wanda and Toughy had set off to meet Eddie, Foley and Jenkins went to find their own missing comrade. The Nazi they knew as Karl Mann was a master mind to them. A draft dodger and a deserter would look to a stronger man. There had been friction between Vernon and Mann, because Vernon despised Mann as a German soldier, even though he himself was an escaped convict and doing nothing to help whip the Germans.

Foley and Jenkins somehow felt safer under Mann's mastery. He did their thinking for them and when he wasn't present they felt weak, as they had in the cave when they were pitted against Dale Hutchinson and the dog. So now the two men hit for the camp they'd occupied for weeks, deeper in the lava. That was the only place they knew to look for the German.

They had a pretty slick camp beneath a wide overhang which surrounded about two acres of natural earth. There was a cold spring there, some pine trees and a band of mountain sheep not far away which gave them fresh meat.

They found Mann waiting for them. His reddish, square-set face showed both his contempt for the pair and his impatience at their delay in coming back to the rendezvous. Mann was young, not over 25, or he would have been more than a captain in Hitler's army. He had escaped from an Eastern prison camp several weeks ago, but in a very brief time he'd worked his way to Grants, where he saw the northern tip of the lava and decided to hide in it. Soon he had discovered the faint smoke from the strange camp and gone to it. Within a few days he'd gained control of the odd group he found in the natural hide-out, including Lt. Eddie Hutchinson.

Mann spoke without any German accent. He'd been born in Hamburg but his father had been on the German diplomatic staff in Washington while Carl graduated from grade school and high school in Washington. From the Washington high school Carl Mann had gone to Heidelberg and then into Hitler's army.

"Why the hell didn't you come back sooner?" he demanded of the browbeaten Foley. "Eddie came here while we were gone and took every pound of food we had."

"We had a chance to get the girl," Foley explained, unable to look Mann in the eye.

"You've got her? Good!"

"But she got away."

"Why, you thick-headed pigs! What then?"

"Dale Hutchinson killed Frosty."

"Good riddance. Dale is this brother I've heard Eddie talk about?"

"Yes."

"Where's this Dale now?"

"That's what we'd like to know. Eddie might bring them here. The girl's with them."

"A fine mess you've made of things!"

Mann sat down on a piece of lava and looked off into space. Foley took out his knife and trimmed his dirty, grease-encrusted fingernails. Foley was the cook and camp drudge; Jenkins the patient outlook who spent most of his time on some sharp black ridge point watching to see that no searching parties or chance intruders ever came too near without due warning to the hidden camp.

Foley also made trips out for food when someone had to risk going to Grants. It was he who marked the fall of the big bomber.

"All right," Mann at last said, begrudging the words he had to spend informing his inferiors what he meant to do. "Take me to Vernon's body."

That was all he said. But he went in beneath the cliff and got pencil and small notebook. He scrawled in a distressed hand across the paper these words, "Dale H. shot me. I wouldn't knuckle to him. He wanted to command us, but I'm the leader by rights."

Mann stopped writing and looked sharply from Foley to Jenkins. "Did Dale play up to the girl?" he asked.

"Who wouldn't?" Foley said. "Yes, he did."

Then Mann wrote on, "Dale also killed Ike Weeks." Mann didn't complete the note. He merely scrawled, almost unintelligibly, "Can't finish because—I'm going—dying."

MANN took a small traveling bag from the walled-up room he'd built for himself. Then they set out. Just before dark they reached the body of Vernon. With no more feeling than if he'd been handling a piece of beef, Mann turned Vernon's body over to make it look as though he'd been lying on his stomach as he'd written the death message. He tore some sheets from the notebook, then placed the book before Vernon's face and put the pencil between stiffened fingers.

"Now," he said to Jenkins and Foley, "you boys don't dare go back to the camp tonight. Remember that little cave on the very edge of the lava out there, where we cached the canned corn, coffee and flour?"

"Yeah," Foley said dubiously. "We need the grub, too."

"Well, hide out for a day in that cave. Stay close, too, boys, for there's going to be hell to pay around here for a while. Then everything will quiet down and we'll hunt us a better camp spot, deeper in the lava and safer."

"Where you goin'?" Foley asked, still not too assured.

"Me? I'm going out to see that a mob hangs Dale Hutchinson. Eddie, too, if he doesn't come across with that money. Don't you boys worry, now. Trust me, your leader. We'll be sitting pretty in three days time."

Mann patted Foley on the back with a sudden brotherly touch. Then he patted Jenkins just as affectionately. Jenkins grinned new belief in the leader, but the hangdog look on Foley's face didn't go away.

With more oily assurances, Mann got away from them. Off to himself he thought, "The poor ignorant fools! Aren't they perfect examples of a dying race? Stupid. Ignorant. Cowardly. They haven't sense enough even to know that I, a warrior, despise their very guts. Well, the quicker they're put away the better off I am."

Mann left the lava and struck out straight for the roundup. He had only starlight now, but the bawl of the cows and calves off there several miles guided him unerringly.

He thought, "I'd feel at home if I could guide on roaring guns. War! That's what true Germans are in the world for, to fight and conquer and rule. American swine! How I ache to drive it into their thick skulls that they can't match brains with a German! The fools would be better off if they'd give me a special bomber and send me back to my regiment."

That was what Capt. Mann thought as he walked along, the grip in his hand. As he drew near the roundup he heard the night guard singing. Old Andy Hoke was singing in long, plaintive way one of the saddest verses of that old range ballad, "When the Work's All Done This Fall":

Bill, you take my saddle,
George, you take my bed,
Jack may have my pistols
Soon as I am dead.

I'm a-goin' to a new range,
I've heard my Master's call,
And I won't see my mother
When the work's all done this fall.

Mann stood for long minutes, listening to the lonesome, wailing notes. Just a crude ballad, sung crudely and in a setting a German might despise. Yet even Capt. Mann was moved. Perhaps it was because he'd just seen a former cowboy lying dead, and knew that he had scheduled another cowboy to die. Several of them, if everything worked out all right.

"What's the matter with you?" Mann suddenly reprimanded himself.

He opened the small bag and took out an army uniform. He undressed in the darkness and put the uniform on. On the shoulders were the gold leaves of a major in the American Army. In escaping from the prison camp in the East, Capt. Mann had caught a major from behind, snapped his neck with a mighty wrench of a powerful arm, then donned the dead officer's uniform. He'd worn it to travel hundreds of miles, until he'd read in the paper that the escaped prisoner had stripped his victim of his uniform. That had made it too dangerous for a while.

"But these stupid people and police will forget quickly," Mann thought. "It's worth the risk now, anyway. Sixty thousand dollars in my hands!"

A FEW minutes later Capt. Mann walked toward the singing cowboy as old Andy rode on his side of the bedded-down herd. He called low in the darkness and Andy stopped.

"Who're you, hombre?" Andy challenged. "Ain't yuh got sense enough to know not to come nigh bedded-down cattle a foot? Stampede the whole kit and kaboodle, effen yuh hain't keerful."

"Not so loud yourself, my friend," Mann said. "I'm Major Kessler, from Fort Bliss, Texas. Maybe you can help me out a little. I've got in deeper than I bargained for. My, my, I wish I had some good old tough sergeants to turn this thing over to."

Mann took out a pint of whiskey and rubbed the bottle neck carefully. Then he took out the stopper, but he held the bottle while he suddenly thought of something else to talk about. Andy could see the bottle in the starlight and he edged nearer. Mann waved the bottle a time or two as he talked more excitedly.

Andy took hold of Mann's hand. "Don't be so reckless with that stuff, Major," he pleaded. "It's hard to come by around here."

"Oh, yes, have a drink," and Mann seemed reminded only then that he had the liquor.

"Thanks, Major. Effen they's one thing my system calls fer in the way o' nourishment when I'm out on night guard, it's this wildcat steam."

Andy dropped from his horse, and Mann smiled to himself.

"Now, what's up, Major?" Andy asked, wiping his mustache.

"Well," the German kept on, drooping into pretended exhaustion, "I came in here looking for some deserters and for a very dangerous man who's supposed to be with them. Who is with them, I should say. I had to play myself off as an escaped German prisoner of war, but I've got them all spotted."

"Good Gawdamighty," Andy exclaimed, swallowing the whole bait. "Where are they? Are they around here?"

"Right off there in the lava. Been there for weeks. I want you or somebody to go get a posse—no, a mob. Arrest is too good for such a gang. Why bother with a trial and months and months of delay, when we're at war?"

"Them's my sentiments exactly, Major," Andy agreed. "Now I know who killed pore old Ike Weeks."

"Don't tell me they've murdered somebody else?" Mann exclaimed.

"They shore did. Ike Weeks, our foreman. Two of our boys is gone now to see about it, leaving jest me and Snorty Summers here with the cattle. Yuh mean they've murdered somebody else, too, Major?"

"I couldn't be dead sure of it, but I think one of them killed another of their own gang. You know, quarreled among themselves over who's to be leader or something."

"Who are they? What's their names, Major?"

"Well, hold onto your hat, my friend. You know at least two of them. Maybe more. One is named Foley."

"Yuh mean Matt Foley? He's a draft dodger. Who else? And how about another shot o' that wildcat steam? This is terrible."

The German gave Andy another drink and pretended to drink heavily himself before he answered: "A man named Jenkins. Just an ordinary deserter and sort of tool. Then there's Frosty Vernon."

"The outlaw!"

"Sure, but he's far worse than an escaped outlaw. He's turned saboteur for the Germans. I got it from his own lips, when I made him think I was a German. Know what they did?"

"No?" and poor old Andy was breathless.

"They were going to blow up Elephant Butte Dam over on the Rio Grande. Eddie Hutchinson was supposed to go on a practice bombing with a P-38. Vernon and Eddie planned to get the bomber loaded somehow with real bombs, not just dummies. But they went on a reconnaissance flight first, and that's when they crashed over there in the lava. Eddie, you see, has sold his country down the river. But the real brains of the deal is Dale Hutchinson."

"Not Dale!" Andy almost shrieked. "Why, he's been shot up in the South Pacific."

"True enough. But every man has his price, you know. Dale got sore at the government and all the world when they wouldn't discharge him and give him a pension, see?"

"It don't sound like Dale. Eddie, now, he allus was hard to stay hitched."

"But I've seen the payoff money. They even offered to share it with me when they got a little uneasy about me. You know, it was hard to listen to all this and not show my hate of them sometimes."

"Shore, I understand," Andy moaned. "Then who c'n a man trust ef not Dale?"

"Oh, there aren't many like him, thank God. Well, do you want to help me out, or— or— Say, I hope I haven't been talking to a partner of the Hutchinsons!"

"Great Beelzebugs, no! I work for the outfit, but I'll show yuh where I stand, Major! I'll stir up this whole country and we'll hang every last traitor we come on, effen one was to turn out to be my own brother, which he won't. But Dale Hutchinson turnin' like that because he cain't git no pension—great balls o' fire, Major! Gimme another snort o' wildcat steam."

"It's terrible, just terrible," the pseudo major sighed, handing Andy the bottle. "Take the bottle with you, my good friend."

DALE HUTCHINSON sat on a piece of lava down in a large domelike hole, and talked to his brother by the light of a small candle. Wanda and Toughy sat together 20 feet away. The boy's wound, dressed now, wasn't serious.

Above them, in the thin lava roof of the circular place, was a hole not much larger than a manhole in a city street. It was the only entrance to the underground chamber, and they had it covered over with a green piñon branch too thick for a plane in the sky to spot the light.

"They're after that 60,000," Eddie said. "My life hasn't been worth ten cents the last three days since they found out I had it cached away."

"How did you manage to save it from the crash, Eddie?" Dale asked.

"I don't know. Don't remember a thing until hours after the crash. When I came to my right mind, I was deep in the lava and I had that brief case in my hand. I must've been thrown clear of the ship when she hit. I do remember grabbing up the brief case like a drowning man at a straw, when I saw we were cracking up for sure. That's Army payroll money. I was flying it in to a branch that's been having some special training off to themselves. More fellows had just been sent in there with them and the finance officer needed extra cash against payday."

"How did you fall in with—with your friends?" Dale asked.

"Don't sneer at me!" Eddie flared. "After I came to, I saw three men watching me from a lava ridge. I swung into a draw, cached my brief case and then yelled to the men—Foley, Vernon and Jenkins. They just disappeared and never answered me. A little later I saw a little flash half a mile away, like a glint on a worn rifle barrel. That's how I stumbled onto their camp down in a little grassy bowl where the lava hadn't covered."

"They let you stay?" Dale showed surprise.

"I begged them to let me stay. I didn't want to go back to duty right away. I meant to go in a few days, though. But days and days wore away, and they wanted me to stay then because I was giving them money and they needed it bad for grub. They've tried to get that money out of me, but I'm not hand-

ing good U. S. Army cash over to any gang like that. Then Capt. Mann showed up with Foley one day after Foley had gone out for grub. Mann tried to play off as an American bank embezzler till Wanda saw him and recognized him from his picture in the Albuquerque *Journal* as an escaped German prisoner."

"I've still got the paper at the house," Wanda said.

"Well," Eddie said, "I wasn't in Mann's company long till I realized that I couldn't stand to go back and fly. I was a deserter and knew it."

Eddie glared defiantly at Dale. The Marine still couldn't understand the attitude of his brother in failing to report back to his post and taking up with such a gang. He was hammering straight talk at Eddie, and Wanda watched with alarm and distress in her big dark eyes.

"If Dale only could be a little more tolerant of his brother's sick mind," she thought.

"Well," Dale summed up, "you've got to get out of here and report back for duty, Eddie. There's nothing else you can do. You're a soldier, Eddie."

From the other side Toughy put in, "Tell Eddie how many sons of heaven you sent to see their Daddy Satan, Dale."

EDDIE whirled and looked at Toughy and his sister. He still wore his uniform, with a silver bar on each shoulder, but the uniform was ragged where holes had been scorched in it. Eddie was much more slender than Dale, and he had a thin face with fine, sensitive features. His eyes were a deep blue and they were so big a girl might have envied them. But stark, deep-seated torture lay in those blue depths, and only a woman could see and understand it.

"Tell me nothing," Eddie said. "I don't want to hear it. I know you've been through hell, Dale. So have I. I don't want to ask for it again."

But Dale had the fighting man's viewpoint. He couldn't help show it, this time in silence so long and strained that Eddie felt it more keenly than he would have more words.

"Report for duty, huh?" Eddie took up his defense again. "What kind of duty? To get shot down. To go twisting and turning, rolling in fire, falling like a dead duck. Look at these hands. Skin just now growing back."

Eddie was pacing the dust-encrusted floor, his excitement mounting. For an hour he'd been watching Dale and Wanda. He suspected that a bond had already sprung up between them. He whirled on Wanda.

"I know what you think of me!" he cried. "You've reminded me over and over how your dad and two brothers are in it, giving everything they've got. That's okay for anybody who wants it. I wanted it, just the same as they did. But I got it too soon and too hard. You go plunging toward this black death sea just once, burning as you fall. See your buddies trying to bail out, and listen to their crazy cries to each other when they know they can't make it. That took the fight out of me. Shook my very soul. I've got nothing left but a whimpering, cringing body—and I hate anybody that tells me I've got to fly again!"

Only after that bitter, soul baring outburst did Dale realize what had happened to his brother. He'd seen it happen to others when machine guns and mortars and shells were beating hell into them, but he hadn't understood how it could happen to a man in the States.

"Eddie, old boy," he said, "I see your side of it. But go back and tell your colonel how you feel. Don't keep hiding away out here like a coward. They'll take into consideration what you've been through and give you a leave. It's this hiding that's eating your heart away. Once you've got it off your chest and you get off on a leave somewhere, you'll be the same old Eddie who used to ride wilder broncs than I ever had the nerve to fork. Remember the time when you were about 12 and I was 14, and I dared you to run and leap onto a rattlesnake's head as it crawled, and you did it just for the hell of the thing?"

"Dale, no!" Wanda exclaimed. "Eddie, did you smash a rattlesnake's head like that?"

"He sure did," Dale answered for him.

WANDA slapped Eddie on the arm in her eagerness to assure him he hadn't lost her regard. Even Toughy caught on and said, "Boy, any guy who'd do that, my money's down on him when it comes to a real fight."

"That was when I was 12," Eddie said, breaking into humble melancholy. "But now I've not even got the guts to stand up and fight that gang for the money. They're after it, and they mean to get it if they have to kill me. And what do I do? Fight back? No, I cringe and hide and skulk around like a little dog trying to keep a bone from big dogs."

"Now, Eddie, wait till the showdown comes," Wanda said. "It may, too. They're still after us. That Capt. Mann is the deadliest fighter you'll ever meet, and you'll kill him the same as you would any other brain-swollen Nazi."

Eddie didn't seem able to get off the subject of the crashing bomber. "There's no telling how I did it, or what happened," he said, "but I walked away from her after she crashed. Just one of those things. But Capt. Mann was right. I'd be a fool ever to go take another ship off the ground."

"German brain wash for our boys!" Toughy cried. "You didn't believe him, did you, Eddie?"

"Me? Of course not—no, wait. I think I did believe him. He kept pouring that into my ears night and day. Say, maybe—"

"He did that to you, not the fall itself," Wanda cried. "You're going to see it now and show him yet, Eddie. The Germans are masters at propaganda and he just slipped one over on you."

"The rest of them helped him," Eddie said. "Vernon twitted me a thousand times for trying to be patriotic. Foley and Jenkins just let that pair lead them around by the nose. Even they despised me, I think because I did now and then feel like a real soldier. Wanda, keep on. Tell me more. You're giving me hope in myself!"

Tears rushed to the girl's eyes. This was what she'd been working for the past two weeks. Fighting for an American soldier's soul. Inviting disaster, tempting any sort of charges against her because of the men she had to meet and tolerate, just to snatch Eddie Hutchinson back from such perfidy.

Eddie misinterpreted her tears. Now that he'd talked freely, he was ready to plunge on.

"Wanda," he said, so low Dale and Toughy might not hear, "I'm on the road back. Honest, I am. But it takes you. I've told you 50 times since you came to the Cross J but since the crash I haven't had the gall to open my mouth—but I've got to now. A comeback means exactly nothing to me without you. I love you, kid."

Wanda shot a glance at Dale. He had his eyes on them, and she thought she read fright in his look. It had been only this morning that he had held her in his arms that crazy moment, and she knew that she'd never want to be in any other man's arms. Poor Eddie! She'd hardly been able to tell him no before, it seemed to hurt him so. Now it was a thousand times harder.

But she hadn't more than started on the halting words when Eddie broke in. He'd seen that look at Dale, understood the meaning of her hesitant answer now. He spun about on Dale. A strange, wild look flamed into his eyes.

"So you're taking my girl away from me," he cried, "while you try to soft-soap me into going back to duty! What a brother you've turned out to be!"

Eddie strode toward Dale, fists clenched, eyes afire with a momentary rage so great he was like an insane man.

"Well," he cried, "take her! I'll take what's left for me—desertion and the pleasure of blowing in 60,000 berries before they catch me and send me to the pen!"

Eddie stepped upon the small pile of rocks which Toughy had stacked up beneath the manhole for climbing out. Dale realized that the blow about Wanda was driving his already unbalanced brother to utter despair. Dale seized him by the arm.

"Listen, Eddie," he pleaded, "you've got me all wrong. Don't go away from us feeling like this."

Eddie stepped back and faced Dale. The unbridled rage in him let loose.

"Maybe you don't know yet how I feel!" he cried. "Well, this tells you plainer than words!"

Eddie lunged at Dale with all the power in his body. His fist swung for Dale's jaw. Dale, trained boxer, saw it coming. He might have dodged or warded it off, but he just stood there and let the blow land.

It shook him from head to foot, reeled him backwards. Stars flew before his eyes and for a few seconds he hardly could see. Savagery leaped up in him and his own fists drove out. But he checked the blows before they landed. His arms fell back to his side. One blow from him, on top of all the rest, would have pushed Eddie over the brink forever. Dale knew that he must jerk him back, and do it this very moment or it would be forever too late.

THERE was only one way Eddie could be pulled back. That was with hope, and with the belief that his brother had not served him with a dirty deal. The right words came to Dale, were at the tip of his tongue. Yet he couldn't force them out.

Eddie didn't hit him again. He was trem-

bling all over, looking as though he might change from rage to deep, tearful contrition.

"What a heel I've been!" Eddie muttered. "Not even man enough to take it when I lose a girl to my own brother." Then just as suddenly Eddie's voice lifted again and he was shouting, "Sure, I can take it. I'll take it, and the 60,000 will help me forget it—for a year or so anyway."

Dale forced out the only words he believed would save his brother from degredation and shame if not from insanity: "Eddie, you're all wet. I never saw Wanda until after daylight this morning. She mean absolutely nothing to me. No woman does, nor ever can. I've seen too much of women to bother my head about any one of them."

He heard her quick intake of breath, as though someone had thrust a needle into her back. But he couldn't look at her. He tried to make Eddie look at him, took hold of Eddie's arm and shook him.

"Have we got that clear now?" he demanded.

Eddie suddenly laughed, jerkily and a little unnaturally. But the load had been lifted from him.

"Dale, old boy, you never can forgive a poor dumb cluck like me, I know, but I want you to know I'll always be trying to make it so you can."

Eddie seized Dale's hand with both his and held on with all the humbleness of an erring peon. Dale knew that for the moment at least his brother had hope left to him, and that might pull him back.

Dale noticed that Toughy was standing beside him. The lad touched his arm, and he was angry.

"Dale," he said, "I guess we aren't pards any more, the way I thought."

Dale knew what the boy meant, but he couldn't answer Toughy.

They had no sort of light for finding their way out of the lava that night. Travel over the malpais without a light would have been suicidal. Dale and Eddie slept on one side of the underground hide-out that night. Wanda and Toughy had the only blanket on the opposite side. They'd had no supper and there was no breakfast.

"We better hit for the roundup camp first thing this morning," Wanda said. "We'll get chow sooner there—and—and we'll the sooner have help in case that Capt. Mann tries to get us before we can make it out."

Capt. Mann was hanging over them like a dark shadow. They did not underestimate the German. He was smart, ruthless and vengeful. He took a satanic delight in his attempts to show how stupid he thought Americans were. And Karl Mann wanted that $60,000 which he knew Eddie had.

Because Eddie knew Mann's hunger for his money he said, "I'm going to take a little detour and cache this brief case before I get to the edge of the lava."

"All by yourself, Eddie?" Toughy wanted to know.

"By myself," Eddie emphasized.

"But what if you get killed?" Toughy asked.

"There'll be a paper in the toe of my shoe tellin' where to find the stuff. Send it back to the Government."

A moment later Dale said, "They may try to waylay us at our horses. We better leave 'em and walk. . . ."

WHEN Andy Hoke thumped his pegleg across the floor of the little line camp and shook Snorty Summers awake, he shouted, "Come alive, Snorty! The earth is damned nigh come to a end. Dale Hutchinson and Eddie—that Eddie's alive and roamin' loose—they're a-fixin' to blow up Elephant Butte Dam and mebbe burn Albuquerque down, fer all I know."

Snorty jumped from bed and began yanking on his breeches. He was a little grey, bow-legged cowpuncher of the old breed, bald and big-nosed, with a thousand crowfoot lines leading into the corners of his faded eyes.

"What're yuh a-sayin', Andy?" he demanded. "You ornery possum-faced Texican, have yuh had it hid out on me? Gimme a snort!"

"Gulp 'er down, pard. Yuh'll need three snorts to stand what I'm the bearer of. A Major Kessler come up out there jest now and let me in on the Army secret. I purt 'nigh passed away till he relieved my system with this wildcat steam. Heah, I said a snort, not the whole pint!"

Andy recovered his damaged bottle. Then he flew into a fantastic enlargement of the perils Major Kessler had revealed to him.

"Dale Hutchinson," Snorty said over and over. "Dale? That fightin' Marine? I cain't somehow reduce 'im in my brain to a lowdown polecat like that. But we better git into Grants and round up some more hands fer a bull o'

this size. Dale! It jist can't be. Andy, yuh're as pie-eyed as a intoxified hootowl."

Within a few minutes the pair scrambled into Andy's old Model T where he'd left it on the slope above the shack. The downhill run started the flivver in lieu of cranking. The car coughed and sputtered, leaped ahead and then settled into a noisy rattle down the road. Unknown to them, the German lay crouched on the floor of the car behind them, with an old piece of tarp over him.

Daylight caught them chugging down along the foot of Putnam Mesa. They tossed away the bottle, minus all its wildcat steam. Twice Andy killed the motor on hills and they nearly backed off the road once trying to get going again. But they never looked under the tarp behind their front seat.

At last they rolled out onto 'cross-country Highway 66 and clattered toward Grants. Andy began yelling before he got to the first filling station. Snorty tried to suppress him.

"It's my day to let my hair down and scream, Snorty," Andy wouldn't be suppressed. "This little ol' town is a-goin' to know at last who Andy Hoke is and what kind o' gristle he's got in his backbone. Wait till I blow the lid off!"

"Don't lay it on too thick about Dale," Snorty said. "I ain't plumb certain Dale's turned on his country. Mebbe that Major Kessler is off his box about him."

That disturbing thought kept returning to Snorty Summers as crowds gathered around them and Andy yelled the news over and over. Sheriff Erskine came on the run when he heard what was going on. He had already brought in the body of Ike Weeks, which had created a sensation in itself. Now Erskine virtually confirmed all Andy related by admitting that Dale and the Griffin girl had escaped from him and fled into the lava.

AT JUST the right time, Major Kessler appeared on the town's highway street. He moved toward the gathering with quick, authoritative step.

"Why, there he is!" Andy exclaimed. "Major, how'd you git in here?"

Major Kessler brushed that aside with, "Oh, the Army has its own ways. I need help to go out there and round up that dirty gang. Are you gentlemen with me?"

In the spiffy uniform Mann made a fine, clean-cut appearance. Somehow he lent authority to what the surging men already had in mind. Many of these older men and rejected inductees had chafed at home when they weren't allowed to get into the war. Here was something they could settle by themselves and mighty quick.

"With yuh? Hell, Major!" Andy cried. "We're a-follerin' yuh back to see that roundup is done plumb satisfactory—and they won't be no bother about trials after we're through, will they, boys?"

"You betcha they won't," a man approved.

"That's just the way I feel," the German said. "Gentlemen, step into the bar up here and have a drink on me. It's a little nippy this morning to go out. And spread the word around. We want plenty of help, but we'll have to hurry. And not a word of this over the telephone till it's all settled. We don't want any higher-ups rushing out here from Albuquerque to stop us. Sheriff, you better find business in some other end of the county."

That tickled the mob. Already it was a mob. The murder of Ike Weeks was bad enough, but deserters and draft dodgers and outlaws and saboteurs . . . Well, Grants could do nothing but avenge all that in good old Western style.

Mention of the telephone, however, gave Snorty Summers an idea. Snorty was still troubled about Dale. He'd attended one of the regional meetings held by the FBI in Gallup for peace officers and all war emergency citizen auxiliary officers, and listened to that shrewd, hard-hitting D. A. Bryce of the FBI. Bryce had repeated one thing numerous times, "If you're in doubt, call me collect at El Paso and Uncle Sam will pay the bill."

Snorty therefore slipped away to a telephone. He asked Central to get FBI at El Paso. Soon Snorty was giving regional FBI headquarters a rather vague, excited account of what was going on.

"All right, Summers," came back the final summing up, "we'll get our men out from Albuquerque as fast as cars can roll—or faster."

Snorty went back and told somebody what he'd done. He felt better. But his confidant was angry. "You sidin' in with that lava-bed gang?" he flared. Then the man went straight and told Major Kessler what Snorty had done.

The German bit his lip. This was a bad break. He might not have time to get away for a good start with the $60,000 before the FBI would be swarming all over the place.

He feared that keen, swift-moving organization.

With another round of drinks, the fake major hurried 30-odd men into cars and away they rushed. But where they turned off onto the dirt road down the east side of the lava, the major asked for two volunteers to remain at the paved highway on an important mission.

Two men in the car agreed to stay. "When the FBI gets here," the German instructed, "tell them we left you to guide them in. Get into the car with them, but take them on the wrong road. We don't want any legal strings to hold up this thing for months or maybe years. We might never get these dirty Nazi bootlickers punished."

"We'll take 'em clean on to Pietown," one of the men agreed. . . .

"LOOKS odd to me," Dale said. "Not a puncher in sight. Our Cross J cattle straying. Hasn't even been a fire in the cookstove this morning."

"Well, let's get one in it," Toughy said. "I'm so starved I could chew a leg off a grasshopper right now."

"What do you make of it?" Wanda asked.

"Only thing I can see," Eddie said, "is that they're worked up over the murder of Ike Weeks, or maybe gone into Grants to a coroner's hearing."

"Likely," said Dale, not wanting to worry Wanda and Toughy.

From the clean, orderly shelf Wanda took down bacon, syrup, coffee, lard, salt and soda. Toughy went to the windmill and caught water as it spurted gently from the pipe with each stroke of the lazy rod. While Wanda made biscuits, Dale fried bacon and warmed over the frijoles. Eddie stayed with them, pretending eagerness to help, when he actually was afraid to let Dale be alone with the girl.

It was a quiet breakfast. Too peaceful. They lingered over it. Rex sat beside Dale now, completely won over to him. Sometimes he stroked Dale's knee with his paw to let him know he was ready for another bite.

"Boy," said Toughy solemnly, "what wouldn't my brother Bill give to flop down here with us and eat. Them lousy Japs feed 'im on nothing but rice and fish, I'll bet, and little of either."

Bill Griffin had been captured on Bataan.

"Say, Dale, now tell me," Toughy went on, "how many Japs do you reckon you killed?"

"We killed 'em sorter with teamwork, Toughy. One man hardly could claim credit for many single-handed."

"But about how many?"

"I couldn't venture to say."

"Now come on, Dale. The paper said you swept a crowded Jap transport deck clean one day with a machine gun when you caught it slippin' between two islands."

"Don't believe all you read in the papers," Dale smiled.

Rex whined and reared up to look out a broken window-pane. Then the dog began barking and rushed out the open door.

Wanda ran to the window. A car had stopped at the top of the slope where Andy had left his flivver for the downhill run. The look on Wanda's face drew Dale and Eddie and Toughy to the window. Her red, full lips were in a tight line. Fear had leaped into her dark eyes. All because one man in the car was moving his arm as if motioning others behind him to come on.

Over the rise another car shot. Two more appeared and then still three others. They were spread out fanshape and bumped and bucked bristled from every car. Some of the men were ducked low, as if fearing shots from the shack.

Wanda looked into Dale's face. She was as white as gypsum.

"It's nothing to be afraid of," he said. "They're hunting for Foley and Jenkins and —"

"They've got Foley and Jenkins in that pickup truck!" Wanda said, her voice suddenly tense. "They're after somebody else. You, Dale."

"And me," Eddie snapped out. "Well, I'm not going to take it lying down."

Eddie jerked out his G. I. automatic and stepped nearer the window. Dale pushed him from the window.

"No, Eddie," Dale said. "Look, they're our old neighbors. We can't kill them. It'd be almost like wearing a German uniform and shooting our boys at the front."

"But they're after us!"

"Maybe. I'll soon see."

Dale started out. Wanda clutched at his arm.

"No, Dale, don't go. Make them say first who they want, and why. Wait! I'll find out."

WANDA ran outside. The cars had halted at different spots, none within close rifle range. Men leaped from them and ran on until they were forming a

complete circle about the 'dobe shack. A few clearly were drunk, others made reckless by whiskey. Still others were sober. One of them wore an officer's uniform, but Wanda hadn't recognized him yet.

Wanda spied Snorty Summers and Andy Hoke and moved toward them. "Snorty," she called, "what're you men here for?"

Snorty started to answer. But the uniformed man spoke and Wanda recognized Capt. Mann's voice. He shouted: "We're after every one of you. No harm to you and the kid, Miss Griffin, but if Sgt. Dale Hutchinson and Lt. Eddie Hutchinson are in there, I order them out—as their superior officer! I'm Major Kessler, of the Headquarters Battalion, Fort Bliss."

Wanda was stunned by the statement. The man made himself sound very convincing, almost unassailable.

"Oh, yes," Mann took her words away from her, "you thought I was a German war prisoner. That was my way of getting in with this gang and learning all the things it meant to do. I even had my picture published in the papers as a prisoner, just to make it look good."

Wanda was sick through and through. Capt. Mann or Major Kessler, whoever he was, had these people believing him. Behind her she heard Eddie saying:

"That lie leaves us nothing to do but fight, Dale."

"No, no, Eddie," Dale called, alarm in his voice. "We can't fight. They'll listen to reason. They can't believe this German instead of us."

"But we already had outlawed ourselves, Dale," Wanda moaned. "Now they'll be ready to believe anything of us, with that Kraut as slick as he is. The very fact that Mann brazens it out with Foley and Jenkins captured and talking, shows that the mob will believe him and not us."

"But it just doesn't make sense," Dale said despairingly.

"Not to an honest mind," Wanda agreed. "But Mann is smart enough to make it sound real to these whiskey-hot men."

"That's right," Eddie said hoarsely, "and I'm fighting, Dale. Do what you please. I'm taking the only way out."

Eddie was trembling all over. He was afraid, terrified. He was going on sheer will alone, resolved to redeem himself in Wanda's eyes.

"Wait, Eddie," Mann shouted. "Don't shoot. We'll give you terms for surrender. Don't get trigger-happy yet. Step out 15 paces to meet me."

Mann turned and called orders to his mob to wait. Before Eddie knew what he wanted to say, Mann was moving toward him. Eddie seemed all at once to find great relief in Mann's offer. He glanced back.

"Maybe I better make terms," he said.

Mann came up and faced him. That look of the conqueror was all over him. If he wasn't very sure of himself, Capt. Mann was putting on a great act.

"Eddie, I don't want to hang you," he began. "I'd hate to see the rope tightened about your neck, see you let down a strangling death. They say it takes ten minutes or more for a man to strangle. Your legs will jerk up and down and—"

"That's enough of that!" Eddie cried.

MANN'S words were doing just what he wanted them to do—terrify. That was the Nazi way.

"All right, Eddie," he seemed to soothe. "Just tell me where you've left that $60,000. I want that money. You want to escape from that strangling death. Tell me where it is and don't lie. I'll rush to get it, and make them hold up the lynching party till I get back. But if you send me on a wild-goose chase, you hang the minute I can get back."

Eddie said, "I'll shoot you down where you stand before I'll give you a dollar of Uncle Sam's money, Mann."

"Go ahead and shoot," Mann defied him. "Then you'd hang sure enough, and no money could save you."

Eddie knew that this German loathed him as a cowardly deserter. At the camp in the lava Mann had robbed him of whatever thought he still had of reporting back to his base for duty. Now the powerful, driving German robbed him of his sudden resolve to fight. Eddie wilted before the triumphant grin touching Mann's lips.

"Now where's that money?" Mann demanded. "I'm giving you your last chance, Eddie. I really don't want to hurt you."

Mann's voice became persuasive, almost fawning. He hadn't noticed that Wanda had come within hearing.

"Give the money over to my keeping," he promised, "and I'll see you're restored to duty without any questions being asked. I won't

let you be sent across for combat duty, either."

The gall of the man! There Wanda stood, tilted up on her toes like a half-grown fawn ready to bound away. But Wanda's face said she was anything but terrified.

"Eddie, stand up to him," she urged hotly. "Don't let him cow you."

"I'm going to," Eddie said half-heartedly, bolstered a little by her support.

Dale was coming within hearing now. The line of men about the shack was drawing in nearer, like a puckering string on a bag of Bull Durham. They wanted to see and hear what was going on. Seeing Dale much nearer, Mann suddenly went angry and hard. The sight of any American in uniform was like a red flag to him.

"Sgt. Hutchinson," he ordered, "I'm your superior officer. Give up to these men or I'll have you court-martialed.

For answer, Dale turned on Wanda, took her by the arm and marched up to within five paces of Mann. Dale wore a Colt six-shooter, the one that belonged to Wanda's father. Mann had an Army .45 automatic.

Dale said, "Wanda, you told us you had at the ranch the paper with Capt. Mann's picture in it. Go get it, quick. There's something in that article which will make every American here realize that Major Kessler is a fake and Capt. Mann a real German—who needs hanging."

Dale saw his words strike concern into Mann's face. Mann couldn't remember every detail of the article with his picture. He would dread to have it read here where he was treading on thinnest ice. He'd worried about that paper until he'd gone back to the ranch house to steal it. It was he whom Dale had heard and scared off that first night home.

Mann had to rush matters to a head. He said, "Dale, you're doomed. This mob will never let you live. When we went out and picked up Jenkins and Foley, they told us where to find poor Frosty Vernon's body. Vernon wrote a note before he passed out. Hey, Mr. Hoke, read that death note Vernon wrote."

Andy Hole stepped forward a little. In a croaking, awed voice he read: "Dale H. shot me. I wouldn't knuckle to him. He wanted to command us, but I'm the leader by rights. Dale also killed Ike Weeks. Can't finish because—I'm going—dying."

A low, enraged oath broke from Dale as the last lines were read. Wanda also saw that the note was Dale's death warrant. Nobody could save him unless the mob were made to see what a fiend this Nazi was. Dale had suggested the only hope for that.

Mann put on the crowning touch when he said, "Foley is dead in the truck. We had to shoot him when he resisted capture. Have you got anything private to say to me, Eddie?"

Eddie knew that this was an ultimatum to him, but he wanted to make sure Mann wasn't lying about Foley.

"Hey, up there, Andy, did you boys shoot Foley?"

"Had to," Andy Hoke called back. "He defied us. Major Kessler went in on 'im in a cave, alone. Foley shot first, and then the major had to down 'im."

"You went into the cave by yourself, where Foley and Jenkins were hid out?" Eddie demanded. "Then I understand how you worked it—pretending that Foley resisted."

Mann almost admitted the new murder by a knowing roll of his eyes. "Well, what's your decision?" he demanded of Eddie.

Wanda didn't wait for anything more. She broke toward the line of men. As she ran she called to Snorty Summers, "Snorty, come go to the ranch house with me and get the paper. This Major Kessler is a fake. The paper will prove it. He's Capt. Mann, one of Hitler's supermen. Who else'll go with me?"

The men hesitated. Mann shouted tough, uncompromising orders at them. Even Snorty looked dubious. Wanda saw that her appeal wasn't going to win anybody. That note which Mann contrived to have discovered in the dead Vernon's hands had convinced everybody. Wanda had already been classed with the supposed deserters and saboteurs. Whiskey and suspicion had the mob bereft of reason.

Wanda knew all at once that if she got through that line, she'd have to outrun the nearest men and maybe outfight some of them, too. She darted toward the widest opening she saw. Men yelled at her and at each other and tried to cut her off. With lips bit tight and her heart in her throat, she dashed on. Dodged a lunging, clutching man. Ran almost into one and stiff-armed him suddenly. Tore away from his frantic grab. Spurted away from another.

Mann stormed, "Shoot her if she won't stop any other way!"

"Stop, gal," she heard somebody cry, "or I'll break a leg for yuh!"

Wanda didn't stop. She couldn't. She knew

that this was a race for the life of Dale and Eddie, if not her own and Toughy's.

Excited, angry yells came after Wanda. She feared they'd shoot in spite of any latent gallantry they might have left. Four of the younger men were still racing after her, sure she couldn't outrun them long.

Wanda ran like a scared rabbit. The trim legs in the tight overalls reached out desperately for every fraction of inch each rapid drive could give. One of the young men was close after her. Jimmy Tarbell, deferred from war because he was a lettuce farmer near Bluewater. He was making a supreme bid to catch her. She heard the hard thud of his shoes close behind. Heard a dozen men yelling encouragement at him.

JIMMY was gaining. Wanda's heart went colder as she felt his fingers rake at her shoulder. She summoned still more final power to the flying legs, bent forward slightly to escape Jimmy's next grab. Then she heard an angry snarl. Rex had come up and was threatening Jimmy.

She made it! Jimmy was falling back. "Go on, you little wildcat," she heard him mutter under his breath.

She couldn't exult, even when the other men gave up the race. It was four miles over the rough ridges to the Cross J ranch house. There was no hope of getting a horse this side of the house, then only the barest chance she could catch one in a coral licking salt or dozing in the shed.

She flung glances back over her shoulder. Dale had his hands over his head as men were closing in on him from all sides. So did Eddie. Now it was up to them to talk for their lives until she could get back.

It was time for Dale to talk. "Listen, boys," he implored the milling men about him, "can't you see that Vernon's death note is a fake, that a German military man wrote it? Vernon was a cowboy before he turned outlaw. He would've said in the note, if he wrote it, that I wanted to boss the gang, not 'command' it. Only a military man would say command, instead of boss. Then notice that word 'leader,' instead of boss again or ramrod, like a cowboy would use. It's a wonder Carl Mann didn't write 'fuehrer'.

Dale's plain logic did throw a little doubt into the minds of some. But Mann was determined to push the matter through before the men began to have doubts.

ON THE crest of the ridge where she must plunge out of sight, Wanda looked back. Men were running to a car. She knew what that meant. One car would rush out to the Pietown road, then cut back down to the ranch and try to be there ahead of her. But they'd have to walk that last half-mile, because of the washout. And they'd have some dozen miles to drive, on the roundabout way. Could she run three more miles while they drove twelve and walked half a mile? She had to.

She could see the whole mob milling about the Hutchinson brothers now. Saw Mann waving an angry arm. But still the mob hesitated.

"God, make them listen to him," she prayed as she whirled and raced on. "Keep them undecided just—just 20 minutes longer."

That was a long time. Before she was halfway to the house, she realized that she'd lost her wind, had her legs weak and wabbly already. She slowed down to the pace she'd seen high-school track boys take for the two-mile event. Then she had to slow still more. Two miles more! Could she ever keep it up?

She did. But she was barely dragging herself by the time she topped the ridge in sight of the house. Then she saw she was too late! The two men were waiting for her. Also, two horses were hitched in front of the house. The ranch had become of bug-eyed interest to the whole country, and two cowboys had ridden in from the east to see and hear for themselves what was going on. None of the men had seen Wanda yet.

She put a juniper between herself and the house and dragged at a dogtrot toward it. From tree to yucca to stone outcropping she ran. She halted once behind a bushy cholla haycock-size and looked. Three men were in the yard, watching the way she was expected to come.

Wanda crossed the ridge, dropped into the canyon and got into the arroyo back of the house. The last 50 yards she made on a crawl, into the kitchen door without alarming the three men waiting in the front yard. But two more were in the house, evidently rummaging for the newspaper which she had come to get. They were in her room now. But she had dropped the newspaper into a large Acoma olla that stood on the mantel in the living room.

Trying to subdue her hard breathing, she tiptoed from kitchen to living room. She could hear a man saying in her room, "The

thing just isn't in here, John. Better look under the mattress, though."

She thought that meant they'd be detained another half-minute. She glided noiselessly to the mantel, thrust a hand into the two-gallon olla. Her fingers closed about the precious paper, jerked it out, and she made for the kitchen door again.

But that talk in the bedroom had been a trick. The pair had seen her crawling toward the kitchen door and decided to let her find the paper for them. Just as she was passing into the kitchen, John Ball leaped from behind the door and seized her.

"I got 'er, boys!" he yelled. "Got the paper, too."

Four men raced for them. Wanda fought like a crazy woman to tear loose from lanky, gray-haired John Ball, but he held on with all the tenacity of a man used to flanking down 200-pound calves. Within seconds other men were helping him, and they tore the paper from her hand.

Wanda quit struggling and panted, "Boys, read it. See for yourself that Capt. Mann is really a German. That he's only trying to pull a fast one on you."

"But Major Kessler explains all that," John argued. "He played off like he was a German captain just to get the inside dope on the gang."

Wanda turned her appeal to the two cowboys. They hadn't seen Mann, hadn't fallen under his spell yet. She knew them both well.

"Buck, you and Roscoe listen," she begged, tears in her eyes. "They're going to hang Dale and Eddie, just on a dirty Kraut's word that he's an American major. Think of what Dale has done for his country. Hasn't he earned the right at least to a fair trial?"

"He shore has, boys," Roscoe Walker declared. "Let's read the paper, anyway."

THEY took the newspaper from Ball and started to read. John Ball held Wanda with one hand and looked over Roscoe's shoulder. All the rest shoved in to read the paper with them. And they read there were surprised grunts and an exclamatory, "Do you reckon he could be a fake?"

"He is, boys," Wanda vowed. "And these seconds you're losing here may mean Dale's life. I'm going now and for God's sake let me make a ride for it!"

With a sudden quick, hard whirl she tore her hand free from Ball's grip. With her other hand she snatched the paper from Walker. Within the same second she was bounding for the door.

The men ran after her, but without much vigor. She had about convinced them that they ought to allow Dale his chance, anyway. Like a wild thing routed from its den, she sped for the better of the two horses, leaped to the saddle, lashed the dapple grey into a run.

"Boys," John Ball shouted, "I'm a-goin' to ride with her—just in case."

She heard John's horse pound after her. Heard the other men shout to him and then to each other as they hurried up the road toward where the car had been left at the washout.

John Ball had the poorer mount and he was nearly twice Wanda's weight. She soon began to pull away from him. With a safe lead, she reined down to a speed the horse might be able to stand.

On the way she was puzzled by the appearance of a bomber overhead. The two-engined P-38 was roaring westward from Albuquerque, but she could tell that the pilot didn't know exactly where he wanted to go. He was too far south and too high for her to be sure he would see the lynching party at the line camp, if that was why he was here. He was circling, banking, falling lower, searching.

Wanda waved frantically to him and tried to point toward the line camp. She couldn't tell, though, whether anyone in the plane saw her or not. . . .

DALE hadn't talked much, but what he said had had some weight with the mob around him. Maybe his limp and the scar on his face did more to slow down even the drunken men than what he said. They had a noose around his neck, though, and the rope had already had been thrown up over a limb of the big cottonwood by the dirt tank.

Capt. Mann was in a rage. These stupid Americans had balked him too long, he grew afraid that they weren't going to go through with the hanging of Dale Hutchinson. He was more afraid that his whole scheme was going to fall through, and that Eddie might not betray the hiding place of his money even for his life.

The roar of that plane in the sky further alarmed him. His trick of posting men on the road evidently had prevented any FBI men from getting here by car, but that plane might have something to do with this thing.

He didn't believe any FBI men would have the training or nerve to parachute from a plane, but just the same it was time to wind this thing up and get away with the money.

"Listen, fellows," Mann yelled at the mob, "I've wasted too much time with you good people. I know there's just a little doubt in your minds, but there won't be tomorrow, after you hear all the evidence. I'm an Army officer of high rank. This is Army business, not yours. Of course, regular procedure would require a court-martial and all that foolish expense and delay—but I'm taking matters into my own hands now and I'll stand for the consequences if the authorities raise a howl. I'll even—"

He had to stop for a moment. That P-38 had spotted them and was swooping down so low its roar drowned out his words. When the bomber went on and banked to come back, Mann had another of those fiendish inspirations that had carried him so far in this brazen scheme. He plucked half a dozen leaders aside.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I don't really mean to hang either of these boys. But I'm going to choke Dale a little, just to make Eddie tell where that money is. If he agrees to go show me where it is, I'll take one of you with me and we'll hurry him off. This is what I've been playing up to all along: just a bluff to make Eddie talk cold turkey. Now stand back and don't interfere with me."

Mann went over to Eddie. Eddie also had a rope around his neck. So had the craven Jenkins beside him. To Eddie, Mann said, "It's your last chance. Say you'll go with me and turn that money over to me, or the next minute you'll be watching your brother's heels dangle in the air. We're going to make you watch him till he's dead—and remember it takes at least ten minutes for all life to leave a body. Want to talk?"

"I'll never pay you a penny of it," Eddie screamed at him. "Listen, men, can't you at least give Dale the benefit of a trial? I'm due anything you hand out to me, but Dale is the cleanest, squarest man that ever put on that unifor—"

MANN struck him hard in the mouth with his fist before he could finish the anguish appeal. Then Mann grabbed the loose end of Dale's rope. With hard heaves of his powerful body he yanked Dale's toes 15 inches above the grass. Dale's body twisted around and around slowly and a convulsive shudder ran through it.

That was too much for the mentally unstrung Eddie. "Stop it! Let him down!" he cried. "I'll take you to the money, Mann, if these boys will promise Dale a trial."

The bomber was roaring back toward them now. It was over on its side so occupants could look down at the strange scene. An arm waved from the plane. Then something white was tossed out. No doubt a weighted letter. It sailed earthward, but it was going to fall several hundred yards from here.

Mann knew that he must be away from here before anybody read that note. He ached to leave Dale Hutchinson dangling from the limb, but he saw now he wasn't going to get all he wanted. The 60,000 was the main thing just now. With that much money and an American uniform he could work his way eventually to Argentina, where he'd find plenty of German friends.

"All right, men," Mann shouted above the roar of the plane, "hold up the sergeant's execution until Lt. Hutchinson takes me to that money. If he fails to do that, I'll build a fire in the lava. When you see dark smoke roll up, string the sergeant up."

Mann said to himself, "You'll see the smoke all right, you swine, after I'm safe away with that money and they're dead." By "them" he meant Eddie and the cowboy witness he was taking with him. For that witness he called old Snorty Summers, the one who'd held out most stubbornly against the lynching.

"Come on, Summers," he said. "Everybody knows you're on the square."

Dale didn't try to stop Mann from taking Eddie away. Better get Mann away from this mob at all cost. Dale felt that he could talk the men into turning him loose to chase after Mann. At least he hoped they'd send a few men to check on the German.

Another thing influenced Dale to momentary silence. He'd been watching furtively off toward the ranch house. He'd spied Wanda on that desperate return ride. He saw only a paper wave in her hand at first. Then a dapple-gray horse showed through the yucca and bear grass.

"Fellows," Mann shouted to the mob, "I'm going to have to play a little trick on you, just to make sure nobody follows us and tries to take that money for his own. Please, boys, overlook it."

Secretly, Mann hardly hoped they would

overlook it. But he just had to do the best he could now, for time was perilously against him.

"Only a German," he thought, "who has been under fire a hundred times would have my cool nerve to stay this long and take the risks I am."

He hurried the thonged Eddie to the sturdy pickup, the vehicle best suited to driving over the roadless country. With his own hands he dragged out the body of Foley. The owner reluctantly turned over the truck keys when Mann yelled for them. Then Mann ground the gears and roared the motor.

He pulled up short alongside another of the mob's cars. At his orders, Snorty Summers, frightened now, leaped out and screwed the valve core from a front tire. Mann raced him to another car. Snorty was compelled to repeat the same trick. Too crowded for time, Mann just paused by the last two cars and shot a front tire flat.

WITH every car put out of use, Mann bounced and lunged off toward the lava. It was high time for him to go. The bomber overhead was looking for a place to make an emergency landing. Wanda was so near that her frenzied voice could be heard. The mob back by the dirt tank was stirring uneasily. Already one man had run to his car and had quickly begun putting on his spare tire.

The instant Mann's pickup disappeared over the rise, a most unexpected thing happened. The man Foley lifted himself to one elbow and called a feeble, "Hey, somebody, come here."

Men ran to him. Foley had been shot through the breast twice and now there was red foam on his lips. But he could talk feebly. He had regained consciousness during the ride here, but he had had the cunning to play dead until Mann was gone.

"That devil—murdered me," he said. "He killed—Ike Weeks—too. I saw him. He wrote the—note—put it into—Vernon's hand."

Foley went into a low, weak cough. Wanda ran to him. She knew what questions to ask Foley, and she wanted to get something that would clinch the murder on Mann.

"What proof have you?" she asked, bending over the man.

Foley looked up at her, eyes half glazed. This girl had been good to him. But he seemed unable to remember, to recall what she wanted. Wanda reviewed the happenings at the house for him:

"We were all eating dinner there at my house, and then we saw Mr. Weeks coming. I had you boys sneak out the kitchen door. But Mr. Weeks saw the uneaten meal, and he got suspicious. When I couldn't give him any satisfactory answer, he went to looking about the place. Did he find some of you where you'd hid?"

"Yes. Found me—and—that German dog. I broke—to run. Weeks cornered Mann. I turned to see before I—dived into the wash. Mann drove a knife—into Weeks."

"Then what did he do?" Wanda urged, seeking some proof that couldn't be denied.

"Nothing—that is—Oh, yeah—Mann wiped off the knife and—and—put it back—under—arm."

When Jenkins heard Foley's story he exclaimed, "Mann always carried a big knife in a scabbard under his left arm, under his shirt."

Dale said, "If we only can catch him with the knife on him. But he's too smart to leave blood on it."

TEN minutes later Dale Hutchinson not only was free but men were begging him to forgive them. FBI men, from the bomber that had cracked a wing in landing, cursed the duped members of the mob and ordered spares changed on the cars as fast as human hands could work. They wanted Capt. Mann more than they'd wanted any German prisoner in this country.

Car after car plunged off across the open country, in a wild effort to catch Capt. Mann. Plunged too recklessly. One got hopelessly stuck in a sandy arroyo. Another broke an axle and was stranded. A third driver struck a rock concealed in a bunch of grass, turned over and injured every passenger, including two of the four FBI men who'd come in the bomber. One car's rationed gas gave out too far from any other car to get more gas quickly.

Finally, just one car was left on the trail of Capt. Mann. Dale was driving it. Wanda and Toughy sat beside him. In the back seat were two FBI agents. Dale had a short-barreled Magnum revolver belonging to one of the injured agents.

They were still many minutes behind Mann when they finally reached the edge of the lava and had to take to the black sea of malpais afoot. The FBI agents, while stout-hearted

and willing, just couldn't skim over that lava like Dale and Wanda who were used to it. Even Toughy got left a little behind, much to his chagrin.

Dale knew about where Eddie must have concealed the 60,000 as they came out. He and Wanda headed in that general direction.

It seemed ages before they reached the crest of one of those high, black-jumbled ridges of lava sprinkled with piñon, shrubs and cactus. They were about to plunge down the west side of it when a cry caught their ears. They listened, but couldn't hear it again.

Then they suddenly went cold and halted. Off in a low swing of the lava they saw Eddie and Snorty Summers huddled back against a large slab of lava. Mann stood in front of them, legs apart, a gun on the two victims. The hoarse, terrified cry of poor old Snorty reached them.

"No, you can't murder us like—"

The words never were finished. Mann's automatic roared—the gun he'd taken from the major he'd killed. The body of Snorty Summers crumpled back against the lava, then slid down into a pitiful little heap.

Dale shouted with all the fury a man's lungs could summon, "Mann, don't you shoot my brother like that!" But the wind sent back his cry.

Dale plunged down the ridge in a wild race. He leaped across breaks and raced over broken, jagged stretches that cut his feet and legs and had him stumbling.

He didn't believe that either Eddie or Mann heard or saw him. Eddie hadn't waited for Mann to turn the gun on him. With a cry of rage and terror, he rushed at the German.

Mann's gun roared again. Eddie reeled, recovered his balance and rushed forward. Again Mann shot him. Still Eddie rushed toward him. Mann must have missed the third shot, close as it was. Then Eddie was into him, fighting as only a crazed man can fight.

But Eddie, hit twice, never had a chance. Mann's gun let out another hoarse half-smothered cry. Then he shook himself free from the crumpled body and grabbed up the brief case he had made Eddie locate. He struck off at a hard run, making for a level stretch of lava.

Dale, still several hundred yards away, couldn't reach him with the Magnum, the only weapon he had. He tore on down over the lava. He felt sure that Mann knew now that he was after him, though the cunning murderer hadn't looked around to betray the knowledge.

"Dale," Wanda pleaded, "wait for help. He'll hide in the lava and cut you down before you know he's near."

All the reply Dale called back to her was, "He's getting away."

IT STILL was quite possible that Mann could get away, even with Dale so close after him. In that vast wild jungle of malpais every advantage lay with the pursued.

Dale took running leaps across crevasses, plunged over a broken black field of lava that looked like a dumping ground for all the coal in the world. But the malpais was a thousand times sharper and harder than coal. Dale sped across it and into the ridgy stuff where the timber grew again in the cracks.

Only for a few seconds at a time did he ever lose sight of Mann. For half a mile the hard, punishing race kept up. Dale's lame right leg was torturing him—where three bullets from Jap Nambi guns had got him.

Wanda raced after them with all the strength she had left. But sometimes Dale cleared crevasses she just couldn't get over. She had to rush around to a more narrow spot. That lost ground between her and Dale.

Then all at once the race came to a strange end. When Dale gained on Mann, the German took across a wide open area where the malpais was so solid and unbroken there was not a cave to drop in, not a crevasse to slide into. He never would have gone that way if he hadn't been making for just such a place as Dale couldn't let him reach—where crevasses and caves and timber and ropy ridges would allow him to dodge a dozen men.

But the open malpais proved a trap. Between Mann and the coveted shelter belt lay a crevasse that a mountain goat never could clear. The lava sheet opened up in a sheer drop and there wasn't a way to attempt climbing down.

Wanda saw Mann run along this break, looking for a narrow gap. She happened to know the spot. She'd been trapped on it herself once, but then there was no man after her with a six-shooter.

It didn't take Mann more than a minute to see where he was—out on a piece of lava which came to a point like a flatiron, with an even wider break on the far side. The Nazi had only one thing to do, come back toward Dale until he found the same narrow spot on

which Wanda had crossed two days ago when she got trapped on the flatiron. That meant, though, that he had to fight Dale before he could cross that bridge to life, for Dale already was near enough to cut him off. The German accepted the inevitable. He was going to make a death fight of it or get across that escape corridor. He turned and started walking back to meet Dale.

He walked slowly, with no sign of panic. Capt. Mann still was sure of himself, still believed himself a superman. But there was nothing in his walk to indicate that he underestimated his opponent now. Wanda saw him come toward Dale with measured step, with bold decision.

Dale also slowed down. He knew time was in his favor. He might have waited for help to come, except for the fact that Mann had to force the fight.

Dale stopped just before he got to the narrow spot which Mann meant to take. There was a crumb of comfort to Wanda in that. Dale saw he must get his wind, steady himself for the shock of battle.

It was a strange meeting of two soldiers. They'd fought on different sides of the world, against different foes. Both had come through battle only to meet away out here in a weird, wild, relentless world like this, one doomed to die at the hands of the other.

Wanda knew that Dale had only the six shots in his Magnum. She didn't believe that Mann could have more than one extra clip for his .45 automatic, if any.

Wanda wanted to cry out to Dale to wait, to stand him off somehow until help arrived. But Mann wasn't going to wait, and neither would Dale. Dale had accepted it as his one remaining job in life to kill this Nazi who had murdered his brother.

The watching girl, still runnnig hard, saw Mann hesitate once, as if he were measuring the distance between him and Dale. Nobody knew better than he that the effective range of the U. S. automatic he had was limited.

Mann seemed to decide that he must get nearer before opening up. Dale stood in his tracks and waited. He was turned sideways toward Mann, like a competitor on a pistol range. Mann still marched toward him, gun ready.

A hundred and fifty yards between them. A hundred. Ninety. Mann kept coming, slow, easy, his body also turned sideways now.

From the sheer anguish in her heart Wanda screamed, "Mann, surrender and go to trial!"

It was a foolish cry. The German no more meant to surrender than Dale. He kept closing in relentlessly.

Wanda tried then to divert his attention. "Look out behind you, Mann!" she shouted.

Mann acted as though he hadn't heard her. He knew he had just one American between him and life.

All at once he stopped. His gun swung up, fast but deliberate, more deliberate than fast. Dale's gun also swung up. Also deliberate, punishingly slow. Wanda stopped and watched, breathless. There was a pain in her heart so sharp she wanted to scream aloud.

The two guns let out their first death talk almost as one. Wanda wanted to fall down and hide her eyes, and yet she watched with growing horror.

Neither man fell. Both fired again. Again neither man fell. Wanda put her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, "Kill him, Dale! Kill him!" That would only have disturbed Dale's aim.

They were firing again. This time Dale's gun sounded first. And, just as Mann fired, his body suddenly was knocked backward and he went down. That heavy Magnum bullet had cut him down after all the machine guns, mortars and artillery he'd faced in Italy hadn't succeeded.

"Be careful, Dale," Wanda cried. "He might be playing you some trick."

She ran on to Dale. She heard him saying, "I know where that last one went. He'll never get up again."

Wanda ran up to Dale, threw her arms about him and pulled his face to hers. She was crying hysterically and saying, "Oh, Dale, dear! Oh, Dale, you're safe. I've loved you for months and months!"

"I love you, Wanda," he said, pulling her tighter to him.

And from several hundred yards distant came Toughy's boyish taunt, "Hey, there, Dale, hold 'er tight, like she was a beachhead on Tarawa!"

DANGEROUS AGE

By Marie de Nervaud

"HI, THERE, Tex!"

The eager light that had glinted in Tex Alston's brown eyes at the call died away as he turned back to the ranch house he had just left, to see Goldie Kellogg sauntering down the steps. Her mocking laugh did nothing to quiet the slow anger rising in him as she added, with impudent coquetry, "Thought it was Sally, didn't you? I'm a darn good mimic if I do say so."

Firmly putting down his impulse to turn on his heel and head once more for the corral, Tex forced himself to wait for her to come up to him. The blue eyes in the pretty doll-like face flickered at his studied mask of indifference, and Tex found himself watching them with an analytical kind of detachment.

Golly, but she was a tough customer, for all her fuzzy golden curls and baby stare! How the Old Man had ever gone loco enough to tie himself up to this hot number. . . .

"Woman-hater, eh?" Her laugh once more shook Tex's control but he managed to hang on to it, even after her next deliberately provocative remark, "I didn't notice it so much last night, after you and Sally had turned your horses loose in the corral and were saying good night to each other. A very pretty scene, I'd say."

Tex's hands, hanging at his sides, clenched until the knuckles showed white, but that was the only sign he gave of having heard her. He waited for her to come up to him, with her smug complacent walk that proclaimed that she was on top of the world, and knew it. What was more, that everyone else was going to know it and acknowledge it.

Well, she was on top of the world, Tex told himself, with a miserable sense of bewilderment that the world, his world, could turn out to be the kind of place that could be wrecked by a slender blonde hell-cat like Goldie.

He liked working as a puncher with Sam Kellogg; he liked the Lazy 9, not to mention the boss's daughter. Then, just six weeks ago, at the fall rodeo, everything had gone wrong

for both him and Sally, in the course of one short week.

When you came right down to it, Tex admitted, he and Sally were partly to blame, but the punishment far outstripped the crime. They had been so absorbed in each other that they had clean forgotten everybody else, including the Old Man. They had taken their prizes and never even noticed what he was up to.

But Goldie Tracker was noticing, all right. Goldie was reaching the point where she wasn't winning as many prizes on the rodeo circuit as she used to. And too many people were getting onto the fact that her nickname didn't come only from the color of her hair. You couldn't keep on forever being a gold-digger without people growing wise to it. Therefore, to a girl like Goldie, Sam Kellogg was a mighty good bet. A widower for ten years, owner of one of the largest spreads in the state and obviously infatuated, he was no chance to pass up.

Both Tex and Sally were helpless against the cunning of that yellow-haired gold-digger . . . until the final day when her avarice led her that fatal step too far.

And Goldie hadn't passed him up. What if she was only five years older than Sam's daughter? What if she had been divorced twice? That just showed that you didn't have to stay married to an old codger any longer than it suited you. You could clean him out and feather your own nest, and then go out after something more in line with what you wanted. That was the way a smart girl got along in this world.

So Goldie had pulled all her tricks, and Tex had to hand it to her that her tricks were good. That, and the fact that Sam Kellogg was at the most dangerous point of the dangerous age, had made it possible for her to stampede him into matrimony and get him hogtied before either Sally or Tex got on to what she was up to.

"What you thinking, Big Boy?" Goldie was very close now, looking up into Tex's face, her blue eyes langorously half closed, her scarlet lips tantalizing and provocative. "Can't you be nice to poor little me, way off here at the end of nowhere? You're the only one in the outfit who's under 70. Don't I rate anything as the boss's wife?"

"Sure, Mrs. Kellogg, you rate my respect as the boss's wife," Tex answered with his slow drawl, knowing only too well that he was deliberately throwing dynamite into a smouldering volcano. But for the life of him he couldn't help giving her what she deserved. He was darned if he'd have her making passes at him, and the sooner she knew it the better.

For all that he had gauged the probable effect of his words, Tex was unprepared for the fury that blazed in Goldie's eyes and twisted her pretty face into a momentarily distorted mask of rage. A second later, the grimace had given place to a pouting half-smile, but her eyes were cold as ice and as dangerous as a snake's poised to strike.

She shrugged and stepped back, took a deep breath, then said, in a sharp tone, as different from her former honeyed sweetness as daylight from dark, "I want you to get that bunch of horses in the south pasture out, pronto, Tex. Run them on the west range, then come back for further orders."

"Just a minute," the steely note in Tex's voice stopped her as she was turning away. "I take my orders from S. K., Mrs. Kellogg, until he tells me different."

"Well, he's telling you different, now, through me." Her smile took visible enjoyment in Tex's involuntary start. "He went to Santa Fé early this morning and left me in charge of the ranch. I drove him down to the junction for the Overland. He won't be back for a week or more. So, Tex, you'll take your orders from me; unless you'd rather quit?"

Nothing but the thought of Sally could have kept Tex from quitting then and there; not even the knowledge that that was exactly what Goldie was goading him to do. Through all his anger, one thought was uppermost. Sally needed him; he couldn't let her down.

With a short, "Okay," he turned abruptly and made for the corral, seething with more fury than he ever remembered having in his life. Jerking open the corral gate, he didn't even see Sally, at first, as she suddenly appeared at the door of the harness shed.

"Tex!"

SALLY'S voice brought him up short. He took one dazed look at her where she stood half in and half out of the doorway, her hair a gleaming bronze where the sun struck it,

while the part in shadow was a rich deep chestnut. Her hazel eyes caught the trouble in his, and she stepped out with her quick impetuous grace, to put a pleading hand on his arm.

"Tex, what was Goldie saying? You didn't let her get your goat, did you, darling? You know how we agreed last night not to let anything she might say or do get our goat?"

"That was last night," Tex said bitterly. "I can't go through with it, Sally. We've got to step out of the picture. Trust me, sweetheart!" He put his hand over hers, where it rested on his arm. "I can make a living for us, if you'll only marry me. With punchers as scarce as they are, and the wages we can pull down we'll—"

"You know it's not that, Tex!" Sally broke in. "I can't leave Dad now! He needs me more than he ever did in his life, even if he doesn't know it. I've got to stand by! Goldie would like nothing better than to get rid of both of us. You promised to stand by with me."

"I didn't know then that your Dad would turn the ranch over to her to run."

"Dad would *what?*" Sally looked as though he had taken leave of his senses.

"Why didn't he tell you he was going to Santa Fé?"

"Dad? Gone to Santa Fé?" Again Sally could only seem to give a stunned echo of what he said. "You mean, he's actually gone? Without saying good-by to me?"

"His precious Goldie drove him down to catch the 5:20 at the Junction. Just why he wanted to get away before any of us were up, I don't know, but I bet she's at the bottom of it. Here's what she told me."

Her lips pressed together and the color draining out beneath her tan, Sally listened to Tex's account of his run-in with Goldie. "When she found I wasn't meeting any of her passes," he ended, "she ordered me around like a digger Indian, saying I could take it or quit."

"So," Sally mused, "she was spying on us last night. That evidently got her goat, all right." She pressed close against Tex, looking into his eyes with a flash of her old merry radiant smile. "It would have been a lot smarter of you, darling, I suppose, to have played her along, but I'm glad you're not smart that way."

"I'll say I'm not smart that way! Not any way!" Tex gave her a quick hug and kiss. "But I'm not dumb enough to go on taking orders from that—" He gulped and swallowed.

"I know she's one," Sally agreed. "That's why I have to stand by Dad until he sees it, too." The momentary mischief that had sparkled in her eyes faded to dark, brooding conjecture. "You don't suppose she could have persuaded him to sell his securities, or to put a second mortgage on the ranch, do you? I heard her last night, after I went to bed, trying to bully him into doing over the ranch house and putting in a swimming pool."

"Swimming pool!" Tex exploded. "When we can't get enough water for the cattle as it is? Golly, Sally, if your dad's loco enough to do that—"

"He's loco enough to do anything right now," Sally said sadly. "Goldie has him hypnotized. There's no use trying to reason it out, it's just a fact. But I have a hunch that if we give her enough rope she'll hang herself. She's so greedy that Dad can't help seeing through her in time."

"Well, I hope it'll be in time to keep him from going broke," Tex said gloomily. "Sally, I still feel we're making a mistake not to pull out. He might see it sooner, if we did."

Sally shook her head. "I know I've got to stick around. But we're making a mistake right now, not running that bunch of horses out on the range. I'll come and help you, Tex. We mustn't give Goldie a chance to tell Dad you disobeyed her orders. She'll do her darnedest to get rid of you now, but she won't quite dare fire you herself."

"How about telling your dad that we're engaged, before she beats us to it?" Tex asked. "I wish you'd let me do it before."

"I do, too, now," Sally's eyes were troubled. "I bet she's beaten us to it already, telling him about last night. Dad would be hurt hearing it that way. If I'd been able to tell him myself, I could have made him understand how sweet it was to have it a complete secret between us two for a little while. But now—" She broke off with an unhappy little shrug, and reached inside the door for her Stetson. "Come on! Let's carry out the new boss's orders before she has anything more to say!"

A DOZEN times during the next few days Tex reached what he thought was the limit of endurance, but Sally kept him from quitting though he had little chance to see her. Grimly, he took Goldie's orders in silence, though she drove him so outrageously that even the rest of the outfit began to remark

on it, and take exception to having all the hard jobs handed to Tex.

"Golly, I may be 60, but I ain't a cripple," Chuck complained to Sally, when Goldie had arbitrarily given Tex some of his line riding to do. "When's your dad comin' back? I'm figurin' on makin' a change, but I don't like to do it while he's away."

"He'll be home in a day or two, Chuck," Sally soothed, adding a coaxing. "You wouldn't leave us, Chuck, would you? Why, you know we couldn't get on without you."

"I'd sure hate to," Chuck scratched his head, "but there's just so much a man can take."

"It'll be different when Dad gets back," Sally promised, but a dark foreboding was in her eyes as she left him. How different would it be? How long could she hold Tex or Chuck of any of them in check against this new regime? How long could she hold herself in check under Goldie's patronizing manner?

So far, she had managed at least to keep an outward show of harmony between them. For all her youth, Sally was instinctively wise in human nature. Nothing would play into Goldie's hands better than to have her be able to carry real grievances against Sally to her father, while he was in his present state of infatuation.

Another thing was troubling her, even though it might be a means of showing up Goldie in her true colors. The very day her father had left, Goldie had driven the new buckboard and team that she had coaxed out of him into town and had come back bringing a man named Jake Fuller with her. She had introduced him to Sally as an old friend of her rodeo circuit days whom she had run into accidentally in town.

It didn't take more than one look at Jake's handsome, dissipated face to tell Sally what she thought of him. He had stayed for dinner that first day and in the afternoon he and Goldie had taken a long ride, coming back late for supper. During supper, Sally had taken an increasing dislike to him, in spite of his compliments. When, afterwards, Goldie had loaned him her father's favorite roan to ride back to town, it had been all Sally could do to keep still, but the galling fact that she was no longer the mistress of the Lazy 9 made her helpless.

EVERY day since then, Jake had been out, riding the roan as though it were his own, and acting with like possessiveness toward the ranch and Goldie. While it made Sally furious to see Goldie flirting with him, here again she was helpless.

Today for the first time, Jake had failed to appear in the morning, but Goldie had said at dinner that he would be out for supper. Now, as Sally walked up from the corral after her conversation with Chuck, she was fully prepared to see her father's roan at the hitching post and the obnoxious figure of Jake sprawled on a chair on the porch.

Instead, as she rounded the barn and came in view of the house, she saw a strange horse tied there. The next instant her heart stood still as she heard her father's voice boom out through the open living-room window. For a moment, Sally stood spellbound, held motionless in her surprise. He had evidently just arrived and as unexpectedly to Goldie as to her. But why had he hired a horse in town to ride out, instead of telling them to come and meet him?

Over the quickened beating of her heart, Sally caught her father's angry, jealous words. "Soon as my back is turned, you pick up a man, lend him my horse, make me a laughing stock of the range, for the old fool that I am! If I hadn't met Dick Simpson in Santa Fé yesterday and heard from him what was going on—"

"So, you listen to friends carrying tales about your wife!" Goldie's sobbing voice broke in. "I can explain everything, but you don't love me enough to listen!"

Abruptly turning on her heel, Sally ran back to take shelter behind the barn. Never, never must her father know that she had overheard these words. She thought of eavesdropping on such a scene between him and his wife was hideous, but at least no one but Tex would ever know what she had heard.

A sudden elation overrode her dismay at the uninviting rôle she had played. At last, Goldie had been given enough rope to hang herself! Let her explain! It would take plenty of explaining! Especially when Jake Fuller turned up for supper, which was due to happen any minute now.

Carefully keeping away from the corral so that she wouldn't see any of the outfit, Sally spent a half-hour or so walking in the south pasture, trying to think out what would be the outcome of it all. She was filled with pity for her father's disillusionment but, as it had to come, it would hurt less to have it come now. How the immediate future would work out, Sally was powerless to foresee, but her heart

was lighter than it had been for weeks as, finally, she braced herself to go back to the house.

Sure enough, there was the roan, so Jake Fuller had arrived. But Sally's eyes opened with amazement at the sight of the livery horse still there, too. One thing she had been sure of, and that was that her father would send Jake flying back to town on the hired horse, so fast he wouldn't know what had struck him!

In a mixture of confusion and incredulity, Sally ran up the steps and into the living room, her lips forming the word, "Dad!" but no sound coming out as she took in the tableau of Goldie and her father sitting arm in arm on the divan, while Jake Fuller came eagerly forward to meet her.

"You're surprised, Sally?" Sam Kellogg's voice held a cold reproach that cut Sally to the quick, but before she could answer, Jake was shaking her hand with a hearty, "Well, at last! What's been keeping you all this time, Sally?"

In a flash, Sally realized how Goldie had "explained." She had pretended to her father that Jake had been coming to see her! She had evidently managed to tip Jake off, and the two of them were fooling him into believing it. Even in the midst of the furious anger that swept her, Sally saw the diabolical cleverness of the scheme. With her father in his present frame of mind, her word against Goldie's would be good for nothing. The only thing she could do was to bide her time and wait until she could get him to herself, away from Goldie's influence.

HOW she ever managed to get through that supper, Sally never quite knew. The minute it was over, she excused herself and went out into the soft spring twilight determined to wait down by the corral until Tex got back from the long line-riding job that Goldie had set him to. She had to talk it over with Tex before she saw her father or Goldie again. Heaven only knew what she might say to them in her present state of mind!

A sudden fear that Jake might come after her sent Sally behind the shadows of the harness shed. After an hour or so, the sound of a horse coming down from the house at a sharp trot set her heart beating with the wild hope that it was Tex, but the next minute, Chuck's slow singing drawl of *Git Along, Little Dogie* made her shrink back to her hiding place. She watched him turn her father's roan loose, then go back to the bunkhouse, his mournful refrain drifting back to her on the soft night air.

When finally 11 o'clock showed on the illuminated dial of her wristwatch, Sally gave up the hope of seeing Tex and went slowly back to the house. There was comfort, at least, in seeing that the livery horse was gone, and knowing that she wouldn't have to cope with Jake as well as with her father and Goldie.

If only they've gone to bed, she whispered, but the next minute her father's voice, rumbling out the open window, proved that to be a forlorn hope. Determined not to be an eavesdropper again, Sally ran quickly up the steps, bracing herself to sound natural and not play into Goldie's hands by losing her temper.

"Hi! When did Jake go?" Sally's eyes misted over at the cozy picture of her father sitting in his big chair before the fire, with Goldie on the footstool at his feet, her bright head leaning against his knee.

"You ought to know that, Sally." Her father's voice still had that cold hurt note, only now anger stirred in it as well. "I wish you would be frank with me, Sally," he added. "I'll be frank with you and say that I don't like Jake Fuller. I resent your having lent him my horse, and encouraged him to come out here all this time I've been away. You might have realized the false light it put Goldie in."

"There now, Sam, I told you not to be cross with Sally!" Goldie rubbed her head coaxingly against his knee, half turning so as to watch the effect of this maneuver on Sally. Her blue eyes held no baby stare now. They were narrowed and challenging, daring Sally to come to grips with her. "You know what it is, Sammie, to fall in love at first sight! You're not being quite fair to Jake, or Sally either."

"You're certainly not being fair to me!" Sally's voice trembled with the supreme effort she was making to keep control. Then, suddenly, the dam of her pent-up emotions burst at Goldie's triumphant, mocking smile. "You can believe it or not, but you're going to hear the truth." She squared her shoulders and faced her father, her eyes blazing. "Jake Fuller came to see Goldie, not me. You can ask any of the outfit; she's been off with him every day! You can—"

"Sure," Goldie's honeyed tone broke in as Sally gulped before her father's angry start, "ask the outfit about your wife, Sam! That's what your daughter would like you to do! I've tried and tried to make friends with Sally—" Her voice broke on a sob, which was lost in Sam Kellogg's roar.

"That's enough, Sally! My God, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard it with my own ears!" He sprang to his feet, held out a hand to Goldie and pulled her into the circle of his arm. "I don't want to hear any more tonight," he told Sally sternly. "I've heard plenty. I could forgive you falling in love, even though I don't like the man. But I can't forgive deceit and your deliberately trying to blacken Goldie's reputation. If it weren't for the evidence of my own senses, I wouldn't believe that you'd fall for a man like Jake! Come, Goldie! Let's get out of here before I say something I'll be sorry for."

LITERALLY too stunned to speak, even if she had been able to find words, Sally watched the two pass out into the hall. The slamming of their bedroom door startled her out of her incredulous trance. Her father's words whipped through her head, making no real sense, yet filling her with desperate foreboding and unhappiness. What did he mean by "deceit"? Why had he kept harping on the "evidence of his own senses"?

Heaven knew she'd been a fool to break out as she had, but she hadn't been deceitful! She'd told him straight out what the situation was. And with the result that she might have expected, she told herself, miserably putting out the lamps and going to her own room. She stood at the window a moment, gazing out into the starlit night. The temptation to go down and see if Tex were back now was overwhelming, but common sense vetoed the idea. Even if he were back, he would be dead tired and probably sound asleep. She couldn't rouse the whole bunkhouse.

"Morning will be time enough," she whispered, turning from the window with a sick sense of defeat that stayed with her as she lay staring into the darkness. Tex was right, probably, and it was useless to stand by any longer. Goldie had won, hands down.

Sally's dread of a face-to-face meeting the next morning proved groundless. When, at last, she forced herself to come out from the haven of her room, there was no one around. At the corral she found Chuck, who told her that Goldie and her father had driven off for him to catch the 5:20 at the Junction. " 'Pears like he left some unfinished business and had to go back to Santa Fé!" Chuck spat a vicious jet of tobacco juice at an unoffending bit of sage. "I wouldn't have known they'd gone, only that she-devil came into the bunkhouse to tell Tex to get up and start out after a wild stallion she'd spotted on the north range that she wanted run in."

"What time did Tex get back last night?" Sally asked.

"Last night, hell!" Chuck snorted. "It was around two this morning. Then this—this—" he gulped. "Then she comes and routs him out around 4:30!"

"Where was Dad?" Sally demanded furiously.

"He was harnessin' the buckboard, I reckon," Chuck shrugged. "He didn't know what she was up to. He's plumb loco, but not as far gone as to let that get by."

"I'm going to the north range to try and find Tex, Chuck," Sally answered his raised eyebrows with a ghost of her old smile. "I know I have about one chance in a thousand of finding him. I'm kind of loco too, I guess. It seems to run in the family."

It was a comfort to be astride her favorite pinto, racing across the mesa, letting the cool morning air clear her brain and bring some sort of order to her chaotic thoughts. One thing was certain. She must no longer ask Tex to stand by. Even if he were willing to for her sake, she couldn't let him. Perhaps he was right, and she should go with him. This business of mixed loyalties was killing! Why put up with it any longer?

By the time Sally got back to the ranch it was noon, and while she had not found Tex, she had found the peace of mind of having come to a decision. She would wait until her father came back, and then she would tell him that she was marrying Tex. Perhaps Goldie would stick by him, just as a matter of self-interest. From the way she had been carrying on with Jake, it was clear that she didn't care anything about her husband, but she might find it to her advantage to go on fooling him. And as long as he didn't know it, perhaps he could live in a fool's paradise, for a while, anyway.

There was no sign of either Goldie or Tex all the rest of the day, nor did Goldie show up for supper. Thankful, at least, to avoid a scene with her, Sally went to bed around ten o'clock, but going to sleep was another matter. It must have been an hour or so later that she heard the buckboard drive up and caught the sound of Goldie's and Jake's voices, though she could not make out the words. She was about to get up and deliberately listen at the window, when Goldie's gay "Good night" rang out. The next

minute the front door slammed, and the buckboard rattled off toward the gate.

The thought, "So she's lending him the buckboard now!" almost brought Sally out of bed to confront Goldie then and there, but common sense held her back. What good would it do? She had reached her decision, and the less she had to do with Goldie, the better.

TEX had reached a decision, too, as he wearily turned his horse loose in the corral around midnight. The time had come for a showdown! He'd see Sally in the morning, and then quit the Lazy 9. If she wouldn't, he'd wait for her.

Some time later, a flashlight in his eyes and a pull at his blanket jerked Tex from a sound sleep. Fingers pressing against his lips checked his involuntary exclamation, and in the next instant he caught the sight of Sally's white, terrified face.

"Come quick!" she whispered. "Quick! I think I've killed her."

With one bound Tex was up and running with Sally back to the house, while she jerked out a broken gasping explanation.

"I heard someone in Dad's office—I went to see—Goldie was taking his bonds out of the safe. We—we fought— I—she fell over and hit her head— Oh, Tex!"

Tex was sprinting ahead now, bending a few seconds later over Goldie, his fingers on her pulse, his eyes desperately watching the white unconscious face.

Tex looked into Sally's pleading eyes as she knelt down beside him, and his own eyes lighted with relief.

"Her pulse is coming back. Thank God, she's only knocked out! Pick up those bonds, Sally, and get them back in the safe while—"

"Oh, no you don't! Reach 'em both of you, and be damn quick about it!"

Jake's voice brought them both whirling to the doorway where the sight of him, gun in hand covering them with deadly aim, instinctively brought Sally and Tex to their feet.

"So Goldie miffed it, did she?" Jake didn't waste a glance on the still figure. "Suits me, all right. I'd a damn sight rather have the bonds without her than with her!" His eyes never leaving his victims, he stooped, gathered the bonds in his left hand and thrust them in his pocket. Straightening, he backed slowly to the door of the coat closet, which he opened.

"Get in there, both of you!" He stood back and motioned them in, when a groan from Goldie brought his eyes flickering an instant toward her. With one bound, Tex threw himself at Jake's knees and the two crashed to the floor, the gun exploding harmlessly.

Sally made a plunge for the gun, while Tex and Jake grappled for a stranglehold. With a clever jiu-jutsu twist, Tex caught Jake's arm with his left hand, and brought a crashing upper cut to his jaw with his right. Staggering to his feet as Jake slumped to unconsciousness, Tex nodded approval at Sally, who was holding Jake's gun on Goldie.

Taking down a couple of ropes looped over a nail by the door, Tex made short work of hogtying the two of them.

"Get Chuck here, Sally," he said grimly, tying his bandanna around Goldie's mouth as she tried to yell. "But don't let the rest of the outfit in on what's happened."

The rest of the outfit was still in ignorance when, the next afternoon, Sally and Tex met Sam Kellogg as he stepped off the Overland.

"What the hell! Where's Goldie? The wire said—"

"Dad!" Sally drew him to the end of the platform, her hand on his arm with a loving grasp as she blurted out what had happened.

"But—but, I heard you talking to Jake, outside the window, promising to marry him, and —" Sam Kellogg put a hand to his head.

Then, suddenly, Tex got out, "Where was Goldie when you heard that?"

"She'd gone to her room."

"I knew it!" Tex shouted. "She was out there with Jake mimicking Sally's voice!"

"Dad! Don't!" Sally pleaded at his stricken look. But, though his eyes were stricken, his mouth was firm and stern. He held out a hand to Tex. "I owe you more than the bonds," he said, taking a long breath like a man coming out of a trance. "You say you've got Jake gagged and hogtied in the cellar and Chuck's guarding Goldie in her room?"

"That's right," Tex nodded.

"I reckon, by now, they'll be glad of a chance to vamouse from the range for good and all," he mused. "I'll swallow my medicine and get a divorce for desertion in good time. Meanwhile," he glanced from Tex to Sally, "I'm not forgetting that debt I owe you, Tex. How about taking Sally in full payment?"

"Suits me." Tex's gruff voice broke with emotion at Sally's breathless, almost inaudible, "Me, too!" Then, for a moment, the world stood still as the three of them clasped hands.

RANCH STRUCK

By Monte Castle

FOR a girl who was practically engaged to one man, Martie Leonard was certainly in a tearing hurry to find out whether she had a letter from another one. Her walk became a run as she neared the crossroads where her uncle's mail box, with half a dozen others, was bolted to the rim of a revolving old wagon wheel. The impudent wind tossed her brown hair up into flying questionmarks and whipped her skirts about her slim, city-bred legs.

Of course the only reason she was anxious to see if Bruce Wyeth had written to her, she almost convinced herself, was because he owed her an apology. Otherwise she hated him! The nerve of him, telling her that last night before he took his cattle up into the hills for the summer that she was a romantic little fool even to think she was cut out for ranch life. Ranch-struck, he'd called her—the way some girls were stage-struck. Why, she didn't know a hackamore from a haysweep.

Of course, he scoffed, she'd found the ranch a pleasant place for a vacation when she brought her Aunt Harriet out here after an operation and stayed on till the latter was well again. But that wasn't ranching. Real ranch life exacted as much from women as it did from men. A true ranch girl—or a ranch wife, he implied—had to have savvy, had to be able to take it. And he as good as said she had no savvy and that she couldn't take it.

Then he'd kissed her casually and patted her on the arm and set off for the hills. It was two weeks now since he'd left, and not a word had she heard from him since. She supposed that when he came down at the end of the summer, he'd calmly pick himself a suitable wife—some nice husky ranch girl who'd cut her teeth on a saddlehorn and had never known what it meant to be scared of horses and bulls and rattlesnakes.

Her small chin jutted angrily—and quivered a little. Well, anyhow, Joe Stiles liked her the way she was. He didn't think she'd be a failure as a rancher's wife. In fact he wanted her to

become one just as fast as he could get the license.

"Mrs. Joseph Ellerbee Stiles," she said tentatively under her breath and waited for the thrill that should follow. But there wasn't any thrill. . . . Oh, well, everybody said you learned to love a man after you were married to him. Especially if he was a fine, solid fellow like Joe Stiles, who'd made such a good thing out of his pure-bred Guernsey herd, shipping fancy milk clear to Denver. Yes, it ought to be easy to fall in love with Joe Stiles.

Consequently she should have been pleased, instead of startled, when a clatter of hoofs made her whirl to see Joe Stiles riding up for his own mail. She had forgotten that his was one of the mail boxes on the wagon wheel, along with her uncle's and the Wyeths' and several others. He slid to the ground, his square, ruddy face beaming.

"Lordy, but you look pretty today, Martie.

How could a girl who wore fancy shoes and who didn't know a hackamore from a haysweep expect to be a rancher's wife? Yet that logic didn't take into account young hearts, nor Martie's fine courage.

Pretty as—" he floundered helplessly, then finished with an air of triumph— "as the girl on the hog-serum calendar."

He edged closer to her, so close that she tried to back away from him. But there was no place to back, in the deeply rutted country road. He slid a muscular arm about her waist.

"Hop up in front of me in the saddle, Martie, and I'll give you a lift home. You know, don't you, that I'm wantin' to ride double with you for the rest of my life?" A darker red mounted up across his already red face. "Here, wait a minute, I'll see if you got any mail—" He started to reach toward her uncle's mail box.

Martie wanted to scream; she wanted to grab hold of his arm to stop him. For some obscure reason she couldn't have him find out that Bruce Wyeth had written to her—that is, if Bruce had. But she only said tensely, "No, thanks, Joe. I'll get our mail. And I'd rather not ride back. I'm still sort of scared of a horse; and besides, I—I think I need the exercise."

He smiled stubbornly and paid no heed to her as he picked her up just to show how strong he was. Even as she kicked and struggled, it flashed through her mind that he had forgotten about their mail box for which she was very grateful. He started to lift her up to his saddle.

One of her silly slippers fell off, one of the very pair that Bruce had made such fun of— "You and your talk about ranching! Those ventilated shoes would be swell to slop pigs in, wouldn't they?" he'd jeered, and she had flared back, "But you don't keep any pigs—I mean, if I did slop pigs, I guess I could get the right kind of shoes for it, couldn't I? Only have to go and buy 'em!"

Joe was conscious only of the struggling girl in his arms. He held her close in a suffocating bear-hug. In another minute he'd be kissing her! She could smell chewing tobacco on his breath and see every separate, sandy, three-day-old whisker on his square chin. Unaccountably and desperately, she fought against being kissed by this man whom she had just decided to marry.

He sensed her frantic withdrawal and set her down with an iron restraint. But there was an odd waiting gleam far back in his eyes, like smouldering embers lying there. "I'm thinking of adding a bay window to the sittin' room," he said casually. "You said a south sun was good for plants. Maybe you can give me some idees." He was still breathing heavily.

"Oh, I'd love to, Joe," she said in a rush of relief at being free of his embrace. "When you come over tonight, I'll make you some sketches."

"Yeah. And maybe by then you'll know your mind about—about some other things, eh, Martie?"

She was glad of any loophole to get away. "Yes, Joe, maybe I will."

He got his own mail, clambered up onto his horse again and set off, with a friendly wave. There was something so confident about the way he sat his big bay, confident of himself and of life and of her. Perhaps he really did know what was best for both of them, Martie thought. At any rate, he didn't have any doubts about whether or not she'd make a good ranch wife.

SHE opened her uncle's mail box and extracted the mail. She didn't admit, even to herself, that she was hoping Bruce had written something which would help her make up her mind about Joe Stiles. But there wasn't any letter at all. There were only a feed catalog for her uncle and some quilt pieces for Aunt Harrie and a couple of ads for herself.

She bit her lip. Then her eye rested speculatively on the Wyeth box which was next to her uncle's. Maybe Bruce had written to his father. Glancing about her guiltily, she pulled open the front of the Wyeth mail box and peered inside. There it was, right on the top, a letter addressed to his dad in Bruce's scrawly handwriting and postmarked Burnt Cabin, which was the store and post office nearest his range allotment up in the National Forest.

Her heart pumped excitedly. She pulled out the Wyeth mail. Why not take it up to Mr. Wyeth? It would only be neighborly, she told herself firmly. A widower, with his older son gone, and all the batching for himself and ten-year-old Tom to do, and the ranch to run, and the rest of the cattle to look after, and the irrigation to 'tend to—Mr. Wyeth would certainly appreciate her bringing the mail up to the house for him. Of course, Bruce's letter meant nothing to her; she was just trying to be helpful to the older man.

As she started up the quarter-mile lane leading to the Wyeth ranch buildings, she looked out across the rolling green-velvet prairies that stretched on either side. "Swell cow country," Bruce had called it; and it was. She'd give anything in the world to live here for the rest of her life.

But if she did, it certainly wouldn't be with Bruce Wyeth! Not after the way he had hooted at her for thinking she could ever catch on to ranch ways. Probably she had looked funny that day she'd tried to ride old Whitey and he'd switched his tail at a fly, and she'd just naturally fallen off into a chamiso bush. And maybe it did seem pretty dumb to Bruce, when he took her out into his corral to show her his pedigreed bull, Red Prince, and the bull had headed right at them, head down and horns waving, to have Martie let out a scream and clamber straight up the side of the pole corral fence. She'd felt like an awful fool when she looked down and saw that all Red Prince wanted was the carrot in Bruce's pocket.

But it didn't mean she couldn't learn, she had insisted hotly. A girl could acquire ranch savvy if only somebody would show her how and—and maybe have just a little confidence in her.

But she might even have forgiven Bruce all this if it hadn't been for that last kiss. They'd been standing out under the cottonwoods at her uncle's, saying good-by. He'd bent down to give her a kiss—oh, such a casual, brotherly kiss as far as he was concerned. But she, like a little fool, had gone all weak in the knees and dizzy in the head, and had clung to him hard. He had straightened up firmly, untangling her arms, and said, "Well, so long, Martie. I'd be the last man to think a little city girl could be really happy exchanging street lights for a smoky lantern or moving pictures for a view of the flats."

And even as she started to protest, he calmly waved good-by and set off on his horse for home.

She blushed now with wounded pride and anger. She'd show him whether or not she could settle down here. She'd settle down on the ranch right next door to him and be a model wife. Joe Stiles' wife! For some reason now the countryside seemed suddenly different. She noticed that the rolling green-velvet swells were covered with sharp, thorny growing things, and that the land was slashed with ugly little draws and gulches, like unhealed cuts. She shivered and hurried on toward the Wyeth ranch house.

THE yard looked deserted. She knew that ten-year-old Tom was visiting his cousins at Yellow Creek. She called out. A halloo answered her from inside Red Prince's corral.

She climbed up to the top of the pole fence. "I brought your mail to you, Mr. Wyeth," she called out to the man who was just finishing currying the curly flanks of the red and white bull.

He looked up and smiled at her. When he had finished, he came toward her, followed by the bull. They stopped just below her, the pleasant middle-aged man and the stocky broad-browed animal. She whitened involuntarily and drew her feet up under her in sudden panic.

But Bruce's father appeared not to notice. He gave a pat to the tufted, bullet-like forehead and said admiringly, "Beauty, ain't he? Show animal. Bruce raised him from a calf. Turned down $8,000 for him. I tell him, owning Red Prince is like having money in the

bank. Smart, too! Latest thing the rascal has learned to do is hook his horns in the board gate and let himself out of the corral."

"What does he do then?"

"Heads straight for trouble. You happen to know Joe Stiles—fellow that owns the next spread over yonder?" He pointed with his thumb.

"Yes, I know him," she said guardedly.

"Well, I can't say as I blame him none, him keeping fancy Guernsey milk cows. But it seems like Red Prince has busted down his fence several times and gotten in among his herd." He stopped delicately. "Well, of course, he can't have that happenin'. He says he'll shoot Red Prince next time he busts through the fence."

"Oh, he couldn't. Not Bruce's bull!"

"He could, and he would. And what's more, no local jury would blame him much. After all, Stiles shows his young stuff at the stock show, and they ain't nothin' on earth so scrubby as a cross-breed calf!"

"Then we better watch Red Prince till Bruce gets back, like he was money *not* in the bank!" she said earnestly.

Adam Wyeth nodded. Plenty of good common sense in the girl even if she did wear silly shoes and was scared of horses and bulls. He said aloud, "My hands are dirty. Wonder if you'll see if I got any letters."

Martie gulped and ran through the mail. As though she didn't know! "Mostly circulars and things, Mr. Wyeth. Oh, here's a letter that looks as if it might be from Bruce—postmarked Burnt Cabin."

"Would you mind reading it to me?"

She slit the envelope with her thumb nail. As she drew out the penciled sheet inside, it rattled like a dried cottonwood leaf in her fingers. She read aloud:

Dear Dad:

Got the cattle up in fine shape. Grass good this year. I sent off for a few things I need—one of those linoleum rugs and some window curtains and a cover for the bunk. No use in living like a sheepherder, I say.

Seen tracks of a mountain lion this morning, and the horses are acting spooked. Speaking of acting spooked, you ever see Martie Leonard? She sure turned the color of new rye that day Red Prince shook his horns at her. Don't it beat all how a girl can be so ranch-struck, and yet not know a thing about what ranching really means? To her, I guess it's all picking wildflowers and going to box-supper dances. Sure be an awful comedown if she got a taste of the real thing—blizzards and stampedes and an epidemic of black-leg. She wouldn't last six months, I reckon.

Write me the news, Dad. Who was at the dance? Did Joe Stiles take Martie? I'll get down when I can find somebody to leave with the cows.

Yours as ever,
Bruce

"Thanks, Miss Martie. Glad Bruce is so all-fired interested in his home folks," he commented drily, his eyes twinkling as they looked up at the girl.

HE VAULTED heavily over the fence, and the two walked toward the ranch house together. So this was the girl, he was thinking approvingly. That letter of Bruce's was a dead give-away. First time Bruce had ever minded how the cow camp looked. Linoleum! Curtains! The whole letter was nothing but Martie this, and Martie that. Well, he'd made a good choice. Mettlesome, smart—purebred written all over her.

And Martie was thinking: that settled it! Of all the horrid, patronizing, insulting letters. And she'd really thought maybe he'd be sorry for the way he'd talked. Well, thank goodness, Joe was coming over tonight, and he was as anxious to get married as she was. If they hurried, they could be all settled by the time Bruce came down from the hills. She'd just like to see the expression on Bruce's face when he heard the news. So he thought she was only a ranch-struck girl who couldn't take it!

Suddenly the man beside her whirled and looked back over his shoulder toward the open range.

"There goes that dad-rattled bull again! Opened the gate and is headin' straight for Joe Stiles' wire fence. I'll have to herd him back!"

He ran toward his horse at the hitch-rail and swung into the saddle. Martie watched him go tearing out across the rolling pasture toward the now distant figure of Red Prince.

She leaned against the rickety old pickup truck and shaded her eyes against the late afternoon sun. The man on horseback grew smaller and smaller. She could see him closing in on Red Prince, who was still in the lead—a tiny, proud, head-tossing figure. Now the toy man on the toy horse was edging around in front of the toy bull. Presently they'd all be turning back toward home. She could barely make them out in the distance.

Then, just as the bull had been stopped and headed off, she saw the horse stumble and plunge forward. She heard the staccato sound

of a shot. She saw the man in the saddle go hurtling to the ground. The bull turned as though to charge; then it stopped uncertainly, tossing its head. The man on the ground did not get up.

Martie looked around wildly. What should she do? She knew the barn was full of horses. but she couldn't saddle one, let alone ride it. The pickup truck—that was it!

A second later she was switching on the starter and jolting out across the trackless prairie. Thank goodness she could drive anything, as long as it ran on gasoline instead of oats!

She wove a drunken course trying to avoid cactus and yucca plants so as to spare the worn tires. As she neared the scene, she saw in astonishment that Adam Wyeth and his horse were well inside the Stiles fence. A wire gate had been previously opened and laid back. The bull was outside where he belonged. The shot she had heard had killed the horse.

Bruce's father was sitting up, rubbing his ankle and swearing softly. She glanced angrily at Joe Stiles' buildings, some distance beyond. A nice mess! Joe had meant to shoot the bull, but had killed Wyeth's horse instead. Why didn't he come out and look at the damage he'd done and apologize for what had almost been a fatal accident?

She stopped the truck just in front of the bull. With an agonized backward glance at the animal, she got out and approached the man. Every quivering nerve told her that the bull was just behind her, head lowered, pawing the ground menacingly. But she had to get Bruce's father into that truck and home somehow.

He looked up at her and tried to grin. "Bunged up my ankle, I guess. If you'll slip your shoulder under mine, I think I can make it. Smart girl to bring the truck instead of a horse. Not everybody would have thought of that. I could never have reached a stirrup in this shape. I'm still tryin' to figger out what happened!"

AS SHE helped him to his feet, they both saw what had happened. A tangled length of wire was snarled about the dead horse's knees. Fastened to the end of the wire was an old .30-30 carbine. It was a trap! The gun had been rigged up in the deep grass so that when the wire was jerked it touched off the trigger. If it had been the $8,000-bull in the lead, he would have been shot and lying here dead instead of an elderly horse.

"The dirty so-and-so!" muttered Wyeth grimly. "I reckon you don't know what most ranchers think of a trap bein' set—and inside an already opened gate too. They'd run a man into the next state for a trick like that! Even though they would have kind of sympathized with Stiles if he'd shot the bull himself on his own property, fair and square. Grab up that there wire, girl, and the gun too. Careful how you handle it; I want to save the fingerprints."

Once in the truck, he sagged limply back. Martie realized he had fainted from pain and exertion. This time she was so sick with rage and pity that she forgot about the bull as she ran back for the incriminating wire and rifle. Picking up the gun with her handkerchief, she dropped gun and wire into the back of the truck and pulled a tarp over.

She was climbing in behind the wheel when a panting figure, carrying another gun, raced around the corner of the nearest outbuilding, shouting. It was Joe Stiles.

"I told you, Wyeth, I'd shoot if I ever found that damned old breachy bull on my place again. I'm within my rights—you can't do a thing—I got him fair and square on my property!" he blustered.

His jaw dropped, however, when he saw that it was a dead horse on the ground instead of a bull (the latter was browsing peacefully out of sight behind the truck). And he looked fairly goggle-eyed as he recognized the girl at the wheel, with the white-faced man beside her. She had already started the engine.

She said sarcastically, "So you couldn't tell a man on horseback from a bull!" But she checked herself. He mustn't suspect that she knew about the gun and the wire.

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. What a fool she'd been! For suddenly she saw that the face she had thought so dependable and solid was a mean face with pig-like eyes and a brutish set to the mouth. But a dangerous man to corner, she thought apprehensively.

His eyes were furtively raking the tall grass. He was kicking around in it perplexedly. She guessed that when he'd heard the gun go off, he'd picked up another rifle and come running out, all set to pretend he had fired at the bull himself. He, too, knew what his fellow ranchers would think of a man who rigged up a gun trap inside an already opened gate. He'd assumed the dark bulk on the ground was the bull, and that Adam Wyeth had driven the truck over to cart the carcass back in. She

must hurry and get the gun and wire away before he discovered she had taken them.

"I must get Mr. Wyeth home and call a doctor for him," she said sternly.

"I'm plumb sorry if my hitting the horse by mistake threw Wyeth. But from a distance I thought—"

SHE WAS already inching the truck up behind Red Prince's flanks. Truck, injured man, bull, and gun—somehow she had to get them all back to the ranch before that lowering-faced man back there found out what she was up to.

As the bumper nudged Red Prince, he turned and gave her a surprised glance over his shoulder and took a few steps ahead. If she could count on just five more minutes before Stiles found out—and oh, if only Red Prince would behave!

When Red Prince stopped, after a brief and halting progress across the pasture, she begged him in a low tense voice: "Please, Red Prince, be a good bull and keep moving!" Whether or not the bull had a softer side that could be appealed to by such desperate entreaty, he did progress by stops and starts. But each time he stopped, Martie's heart would stop too and she would give an agonized backward glance toward Stiles to see if he were following them yet.

Once when she nudged Red Prince too hard with the bumper, he gave a tentative backward kick. But on the whole he behaved remarkably well, for a spoiled and pampered bull. Clear up until the last dozen yards before he reached his own corral, he behaved. And then he halted suddenly and firmly, like a nagged and patient man who can be put upon just so far. Nothing would budge him. Bumping did no good. He just moved aside, refusing to take another single step.

Adam Wyeth muttered something weakly, but she couldn't make it out. She looked back, and this time her heart did stop. Joe Stiles had found out! He had got himself a horse and was galloping after them as fast as he could rowel the animal across the prairie. What should she do? Leave the bull where he was—and the truck with Adam Wyeth in it—and make a dash for the phone?

Then, because bulls are as unpredictable as humans, and because the truck had stopped nudging him for a minute, giving him the impression that he was his own boss once more, Red Prince decided home looked pretty good, after all. He lifted his lordly head, broke into a lope, and lumbered through the corral gate with a pleased flourish of curly tail and flying hoofs. The gate even swung obligingly to after him, latching itself securely.

"Red Prince, you lamb!" she muttered and turned the truck into the yard. For a few minutes they were out of sight of the pursuing horsemen, and she worked fast.

When Joe Stiles pounded up into the yard, she had had time to reach the phone and gasp out a message to Central. She was settling Adam Wyeth on the dining-room couch when Stiles stamped into the kitchen. She came out to him, her arms full of bedding.

"Did you pick up something—some wire or anything—over on my land?" he asked ominously.

"Why, yes, Joe. But nothing valuable. Just a tangle of wire and an old gun of some sort snarled up in it. I was afraid I'd run over it with the truck and get a puncture."

"What did you do with it?"

"Threw it in the back of the truck."

"It ain't there now!" he said even more ominously.

"No, when we stopped I slung it down into the root cellar." She pointed out through the dusk toward the outdoor cellar under its rounding dome of turf. There was a sloping door over the stone steps leading down. The door lay turned back, leaving a narrow black opening.

He ran toward the well-like hole. "I don't see it!" he called back suspiciously, peering down.

"It must have rolled out of sight back in the cellar then," she said casually. "I was in a hurry to get Mr. Wyeth into the house."

JOE STILES disappeared down into the pitch-dark dugout just as the girl above him swung the slanting door shut with a bang. Even as he gave a howl of rage and leaped back up to pound against the door, she slipped the iron spike into the lock.

Ham-like fists pounded against the under side of the door. Great shoulders pushed upwards, straining at the hinges and threatening to break the lock. She knew with grim certainty that he could probably burst his way out in five minutes. If only she had some heavy weight to put on top of the door! But there was nothing in the yard that she could see.

Then her eye fell on the faithful old truck. It had served her well before. She jumped in

and drove it slowly and carefully straight toward that sloping cellar door until the wheels stopped at the lower edge and the rusted old bumper protruded well over the slanting door itself.

When she got out to look, she saw that her hunch had been right. The bumper had come to rest on the upper slant of the door and wedged it shut with the full weight of the truck itself. Joe Stiles would have to be strong enough to lift the front end of a truck before he could get free.

She propped a rock under the back wheels so he couldn't jar the truck into motion and went on into the house. The telephone was already ringing. Central said she could not locate the doctor, he was off on a baby case in Wild Horse Canyon; but she had traced down the sheriff, who'd be along.

No doctor! Well, hadn't she taken a first aid course? A half-hour later Martie surveyed the bandaged ankle like a mother eyeing her first-born. It was a good job, and Adam Wyeth was comfortable and relaxed.

She was sitting beside her patient, feeding him a bowl of milk toast, when a car wheezed into the yard. A moment later two men crowded in through the kitchen, the sheriff and young Bruce Wyeth himself.

"Central said to get here quick, you were in trouble!" said the sheriff from the doorway. "Met Bruce here ridin' up the lane."

Bruce pushed past the sheriff and hurried across the room. Martie looked up at him dazedly. After all the sizzling speeches she had practiced with which she would give Bruce Wyeth a piece of her mind, she was suddenly and strangely silent.

It was Adam Wyeth who explained with a weary chuckle, mixed with wrath, about their neighbor's dirty work—the opened gate, the rigged-up gun trap, the dead horse. "It wasn't me that saved the day, though. It was the smartest little girl that ever shifted a gear! Talk about savvy! Any other girl around here would have figured it was too rough going for a truck and would have taken a horse from the barn. But I never could have got onto a horse. Instead, Martie grabs the truck and comes bouncing out and picks me up and also the evidence and wrangles Red Prince back to his corral. Wrangles him with a truck, mind you—her that's never been any closer to a bull than eating a hot dog!"

The sheriff grunted admiringly. Bruce's hand tightened on her shoulder.

MARTIE blushed and said honestly, "But I didn't take the truck on purpose, Mr. Wyeth—it was only because—"

Adam Wyeth interrupted firmly, "And that ain't all she done, either. When she got back almost to the corral and Red Prince balked, didn't she know enough to quit nudging him and just to wait till he decided to go of his own accord? You know how balky he is!"

The sheriff was more concerned about evidence and crooks than girls with savvy. "Reckon we can catch Stiles by now? He's no fool. He's likely putting the miles between him and us."

"Oh, he's down in the root cellar," explained Martie quietly. "I told him the gun and the wire were down there. Then I slammed the door shut on him and ran the truck up over the door to hold it till you got here."

The sheriff whistled. "So he's down there, with the evidence?"

Adam Wyeth grinned and pulled a sheet-wrapped bundle out from under the couch. "We figgered last place he'd look would be under a sick man's couch. The gun ain't been handled. Ought to be covered with Stiles' fingerprints. Here ye are, sheriff."

The sheriff looked at the girl and at the injured man respectfully. "I suppose you know you got an almost fool-proof case against him. Now what do you want to do—bring it to court, or have me keep the evidence and tell Stiles when I let him loose that he's got just 24 hours to clear out of the country in? And that if he ever shows hide or hair here again, I'll clap him into jail quicker'n scat. Which shall it be?"

Father and son looked at each other in wordless consultation. Then Adam Wyeth said, "I guess we druther be rid of the skunk than to go to law over him."

Bruce interposed evenly, "But suppose, sheriff, you only yell down and tell him what you're going to do—he'll know your voice all right. Then after you're gone, I'll—I'll let him out of the cellar and kind of give him a farewell party before he leaves the country. That all right with you, sheriff?"

The sheriff eyed him quizzically. "Guess it's your right, Bruce. After all, it was your bull he almost got. And it was your girl—" He stopped and picked up the wire and gun and carried them carefully out to his car. Bruce accompanied him. Martie started along, too, but Adam Wyeth stopped her.

"Better stay here with me, Martie. You

might cramp Bruce's style. He's got a couple of old scores to settle."

Martie heard them backing the pickup truck off the cellar door. She heard the sheriff shout his grim warning down to the captive; then she heard the sound of the sheriff's car departing down the lane.

IT WAS night now. She stood and listened in the doorway, straining her ears for every sound. First came the savage growl of men, rushing at each other in the dark; men who hated each other. Then came the sounds of a fight, the thud of fists against hard-muscled flesh, of feet scuffling in gravel, and curses. Would it never stop?

But Adam Wyeth's eyes only gleamed. "Almost worth a busted ankle!"

After what seemed ages, they heard a horse lope slowly off across the prairie. Bruce must have stopped at the watering trough to duck his head, for he came in a few minutes later, dripping wet and beaming. True, one eye was closing fast, and his shirt was in ribbons, but he looked satisfied.

Adam Wyeth called out considerately, "It's getting late, folks, and I feel fine. So you better take Martie home before her aunt starts to worry. Later, Miss Martie, I'll try to think up words to thank you with."

In a pleasant daze they obeyed. They got only as far as the lilac bush when Bruce caught her to him eagerly. It was Martie who pushed him away this time. "I might as well confess, Bruce, I still haven't got a bit of ranch savvy. And I'm not brave either; I'm just as scared as ever of horses and bulls and things—"

"There's all kinds of bravery, Martie, and the bravest kind tackles the things you *are* afraid of. Can't you see, all that talk of mine about your not being able to take it was just trying to keep myself from falling in love with you? How could I hope that you—a smart, pretty little girl from the city—would really be satisfied with a plain cow ranch like this, and a plain cow waddy like me? Then I got up there all alone, and I knew it wasn't any use. You can't argue with love, and I knew I was crazy about you and that I had to find out if you meant it about being willing to settle down here. So I come riding down hell-for-leather to find out."

Martie was silent because she couldn't make her throat work, and because her heart was acting up so.

Bruce went on pleadingly, "I spent the whole two weeks I was up there working on the old trail. I believe we could make it with the truck now, leading my horse. It would be kind of a nice place for a honeymoon. And I'd promise you, you wouldn't ever have to ride a horse again as long as you lived."

This time she managed to find her voice. "Poof! We don't need to take the truck on my account. If you honestly believe in me, Bruce, I could ride anything. I could ride Red Prince, if you said the word!"

He laughed excitedly and pulled her close to him, tilting up her chin. And it was no brotherly kiss he gave her this time. It was a lover's kiss. . . . As for Martie, she had discovered that it was mighty pleasant *not* to have to wait till after you were married to fall in love with a man.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What tribe of Indians performs an annual ceremonial dance in which dancers carry live rattlesnakes in their hands and mouths?

2. What are Western wild horses called, and why?

3. Distinguish, in Western history, between Jesse Chisholm and John S. Chisum.

4. What is a "Tucson bed"?

5. Who was the Gunless Marshal of Abilene?

6. In the National Forests which will you find grazing mostly on mountain range above timberline, cattle or sheep?

7. To braid an average four-strand rawhide riata, about how many yearling hides would you require: 1, 2, 4, 6, or 8?

8. Who weaves Navajo rugs, the Navajo buck or squaw?

9. Who was Joaquín Murieta?

10. Distinguish between a wagon boss and a buggy boss.

You will find the answers to these questions on page 107. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you still have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

SLICING bacon beside a small campfire, Carol Trevis listened for a repetition of the sound that had compelled her attention the previous moment. Outside her circle of light the night lay velvety dark, illumined only by stars. On a bed of coals her coffee pot bubbled softly. The small stream close by slipped whisperingly over its bed of sand and smooth pebbles.

Yet there was an alien something.... There it was again—a stealthy footstep, a faint slithering noise as of a heavy body easing through brush!

Whatever his intent, the prowler was human. Convinced of this Carol got to her feet, sliding her right hand into a pocket to grip the barrel of a small pistol. Slim and unmistakably feminine in saddle pants, checkered shirt and flat-crowned sombrero, she sent her voice ringing into the night.

"Who's out there?"

Silence answered. For a moment it seemed that the skulker would refuse to show himself. Then again footsteps sounded. The girl's heart made a quick double beat, for, no longer attempting concealment, the steps made straight in her direction.

Out of the darkness a man's tall figure took shape, halted on the opposite side of the fire. He was young and powdered with dust. A two-day beard stubbled the lower part of his face without detracting from a wide, grave mouth and a cleft, square chin. From the shade of his hat brim dark eyes peered into hers with curious intentness.

"My bronc broke his leg back in the hills," he explained diffidently. "I headed for your fire, thinking maybe it'd be someone who could give me a lift. When I saw you were a girl alone, I decided to circle your camp and wait 'til morning to show myself. Didn't want to scare you."

His smile seemed forced to Carol, as forced as his story was thin. But it was his business, and she had been born and bred in a land that did not approve the questioning of strangers.

"I'll be glad to give you a lift in the morning," she asserted. "Something happened to my lights, so I'm stuck here for the night myself. But—" her smile warmed—"I can feed you."

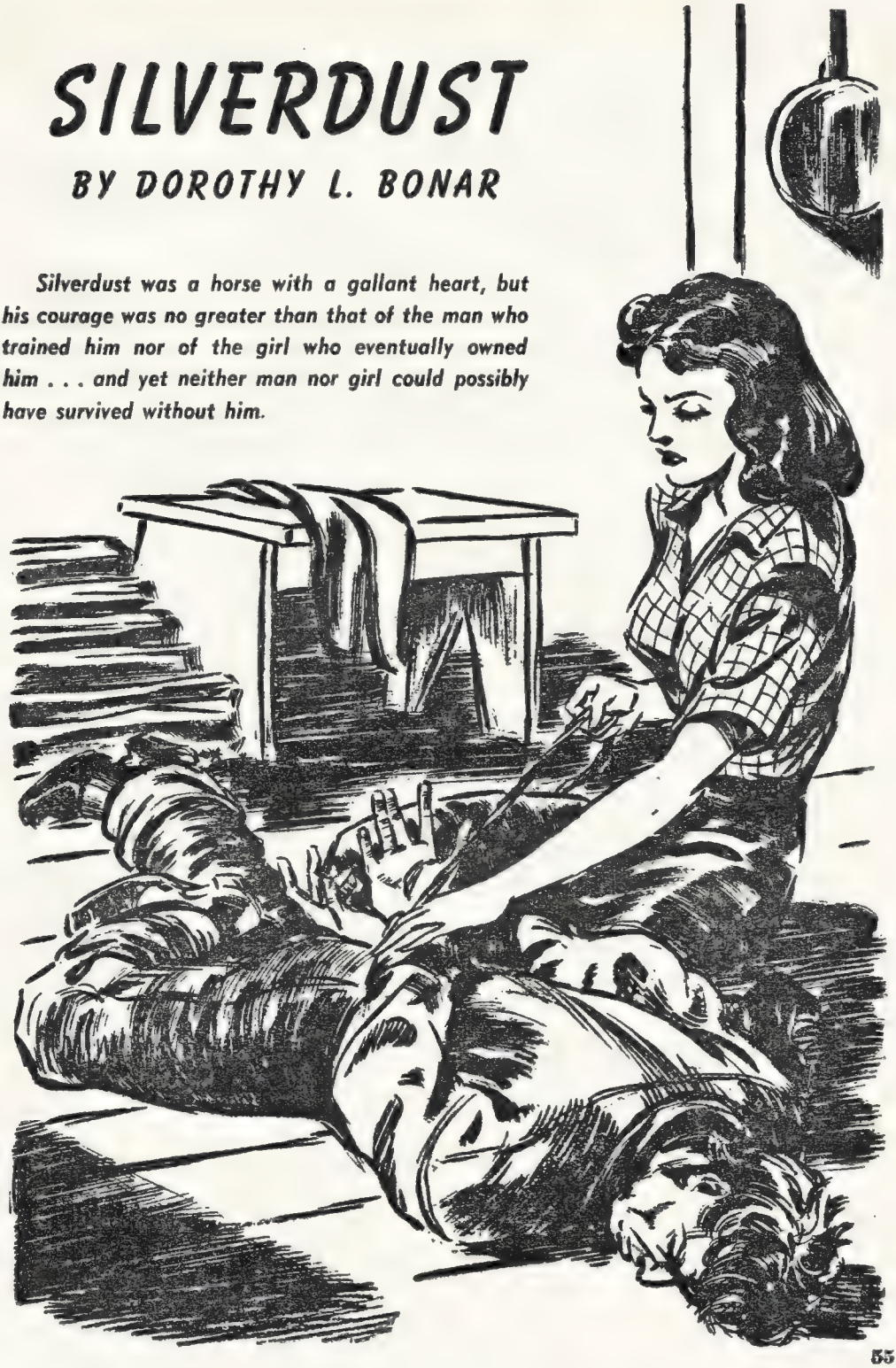
"Sounds great to me, ma'am!" With a sigh he settled wearily to the ground and stretched out his legs.

Carol added bacon to that already sizzling

SILVERDUST

BY DOROTHY L. BONAR

Silverdust was a horse with a gallant heart, but his courage was no greater than that of the man who trained him nor of the girl who eventually owned him . . . and yet neither man nor girl could possibly have survived without him.



in a skillet, opened a second can of beans, sternly quelling speculation. From the way his gaze traveled about, though, she guessed his curiosity to be as great as hers. She had a hunch that hunger alone exceeded his interest in her person, her camp equipment and low-slung roadster. Once she caught him craning his neck as though trying to read the license plates.

But the angle at which the car stood made this impossible. He started guiltily when he saw that she had noticed. "Arizona, 3-416," Carol had an inane impulse to inform him sweetly, but choked it back when she observed a tremble in the hands accepting a well filled plate and steaming cup.

"Why, he's half starved!" she reflected, watching his perceptible efforts to keep from wolfing the food. The wave of pity that swept her was a revelation. Now that those disconcerting eyes were downcast she noted that his face was worn, haggard. Intuitively she knew that he was not merely the puncher afoot he had claimed to be, knew that he was in serious trouble.

"Peaches for dessert," she announced brightly, to hide churning thoughts. The next moment she clutched the can convulsively. From out of the night had swelled a tattoo of horses' hoofs, far to the west but heading unmistakably in this direction.

Her gaze flashed to the man across the fire. He was sitting rigid, head high. Of a sudden he put down his plate and leaped to his feet. Briefly his eyes bored into hers, hard, challenging, desperate. Then he whirled and melted into the night as abruptly as he had emerged from it so short a time ago.

For moments Carol sat frozen, the thump of her heart echoing the footsteps that had quickly died away. The drumming of hoofs kept growing louder and clearer. They would be here soon.

He might have examined her car to see if she were lying about the lights, Carol found herself thinking. He might have stolen it anyway in a reckless attempt to drive without them, or he might even have forced her to drive, holding her hostage. He might have ordered her to lie for him under the threat of death.

But for all these things he had been too decent. Impulsively Carol shoved the extra dishes and tin can under the tarpaulin covering her food supplies. When the tread of hoofs halted outside the circle of light she was gazing that way with a convincing show of unexcited curiosity.

Leather creaked. She heard the jingle of spur and bridle chains, a murmur of voices. When two figures moved into the light she was not surprised to spy the glint of a badge on the taller man's chest.

"Seen anything of a man afoot—tall, black-headed, wearin' range clothes?" inquired the lawman eagerly. He had small, glittering eyes. As he spoke they darted about, taking in the roadster and camp site, raking the girl herself from head to foot.

Carol found it easy to disavow knowledge of the fugitive. "Haven't seen a soul since I left Sagetown," she asserted.

"A good thing miss. He's a bad hombre." The speaker nodded to add weight to the statement. "I'm Sheriff Stanley of Dawson County. This is Mose Smith."

He jerked a thumb towards his companion, an older man, heavy-set, with teeth that gleamed unpleasantly.

Lawmen they might be, reflected Carol, but there was little about them to inspire confidence or respect. She felt her sympathy for the fugitive swell to new strength. There had been a warm, human quality about the latter, something distinctly appealing. These men had the look of wolves on a bloody trail.

"My name is Carol Trevis," she told them.

For the first time Sheriff Stanley's gaze became stationary, fixed itself upon her face. "The niece Mike Trevis left his 2 Bar Cross to?" he queried.

"So I've been told," Carol's voice remained matter-of-fact. Nevertheless, her alert mind was grasping impressions, placing her inexplicably on guard. She caught a swift exchange of glances between the two lawmen. Then the deputy spoke. At his fawning, gutteral tone everything inside the girl recoiled.

"So you're the li'l lady we been waitin' for! We figgered you'd go by train straight to Eagle City. Martin's been keepin' an eye out for you and . . ."

"He means Mike's lawyer," broke in Stanley smoothly. "But you know his name, of course." His eyes narrowed slightly. "When he wrote, did he explain how Mike died?"

"No. He just said the ranch had been left to me. It was a real surprise because I never knew my uncle. You see, he was a lot older than my dad and only a half-brother. They didn't get along too well. Dad hadn't heard from him since I was a baby."

Carol tried to sound artless, afraid that to be too close-mouthed would arouse their suspicions. At the same time she was wondering about this abrupt switch of interest from their manhunt to her personal affairs.

Stanley did not leave her long in suspense. "Then you'd best know the facts right away," he said decisively. "Mike Trevis didn't die a natural death. He was murdered!"

"Murdered?" Carol felt a strange weakness go through her.

Stanley nodded. "By this feller we're huntin', Toby Lane. Knocked Mike in the head, he did, and throwed him under a stallion's heels to be kicked to a pulp!" He watched Carol sit down on her bedroll as though her legs refused to uphold her longer, and continued:

"Lane's folks was nesters. They both died when Lane was about 14 and Mike took him in, raised him like he was his own. He gave him a start in cattle, the grey stud Silverdust, lots of things. Still everybody figured he'd get the ranch, too, some day.

"Well, Mike's accident had a phony note. But it wasn't until it came out that he was leaving the 2 Bar Cross to a niece nobody's heard of before that we got at the truth. All along Lane had believed he was the old man's heir, too. He found out some way that he wasn't and got mad. They fought and he knocked Mike down, hit his head against something. Thinking he'd die and not caring except to cover up his guilt, Lane spooked Silverdust good and tried to make it out an accident."

"It's—it's unbelievable!" exclaimed Carol feebly.

"Maybe." A frown drew Stanley's brows together. "But it's true. When we put it up to Lane he proved it by making a getaway. He knows these mountains and hills like an Indian, which is why it's taking so long to run him down."

"But he's at the end of his rope now!" inserted Smith triumphantly. "We found his bronc with a broke leg—shot!"

"Goodness!" murmured Carol. In view of the astounding tale and the venom in the deputy's voice, it was all she could say. While she struggled through shock and confusion Stanley hurried on.

"I'd feel a lot easier if you'd go on to the ranch tonight, miss. It's only about ten mile."

"I haven't any lights," explained Carol. "A fuse blew out, I think. I—"

"There'll be a moon in half an hour," interrupted Stanley. "And there's a telephone on the 2 Bar Cross. You could call Martin. He'd be glad to come out to the ranch in the morning and save you driving on 20 miles to Eagle City. Besides—" he shook his head—"you ain't safe, miss. If your fire should draw Lane and he found out who you were . . . well, he's killed once over the 2 Bar Cross, and you're the party who cut him out of it! Better get out of this neck of the woods."

For a moment Carol held her breath, recalling the fugitive. And it seemed that her decision made itself. "You're right!" She tried to sound frightened. "I'll drive on as soon as the moon comes up."

But she stared after them long after the sound of departing hoofbeats had died on the air. If Stanley really thought Toby Lane would come this way, why didn't he scatter his posse in the surrounding darkness and wait? It wasn't that he would balk at using a girl for a decoy. Something told her he wasn't made that way.

It must be, then, that he believed the fugitive had already gone by, that exhausted and afoot, he would soon be gathered in. At the same time the sheriff wasn't overlooking the possibility of a slip, the slim chance that Lane might double back. If that happened, he wanted Carol Trevis out of the way, and not because he feared for her safety. Remembering the cowboy, Carol thrust that thought off contemptuously. What other reason could he have, then, but that he didn't want them to meet, didn't want her to hear Toby Lane's side of the story?

From behind came the sound of a step. A voice called cautiously, "Mosey this way, will you, ma'am? Maybe I'd better keep out of the light."

With no show of surprise Carol obeyed. "I had a hunch you'd stick around," she told him.

"I wouldn't of, if I hadn't looked back and seen you hide my dishes." Through the darkness she could feel the probe of his gaze. He added, "You didn't seem to think much of that polecat's story."

"It had a polecat smell," retorted Carol. "Now Mr. Toby Lane, suppose you tell yours?"

The cowboy let out a pent-up breath. "You're Mike's niece, all right," he said softly. "He made quick judgments, too, and backed 'em to the limit."

"So does my dad," smiled Carol. "Some-

CAROL TREVIS *TOBY LANE*

times it gets us Trevises into hot water. Sometimes it's a lucky thing."

Seated on the ground well out of reach of the firelight, the fugitive told his story. Its beginning was not unusual, the rivalry of two cattlemen for a choice location, the financial ability of one to outbid the other and buy, the bitter hatred that sprang from the defeat of the other.

"Jed Stanley, that was," explained Toby. "He's dead now but his son, Greg, carries on the grudge. They built up a big outfit five miles south, as well as a lot of political influence which is how Greg managed to get himself elected sheriff. But he's aiming higher and won't be satisfied until he gets hold of the 2 Bar Cross."

A new grimness entered the cowboy's voice. "I knew all along Mike was leaving the ranch to you. He did enough for me and it was right for his kin to have it. But a while back he almost died of pneumonia and it set Stanley to thinking. He bought Martin off, learned how the will read. I reckon he figured a girl would be easy pickings, so he set about getting rid of Mike and me.

"Bushwhacking was his first try, but he only creased the old man and put him on guard. Mike said he'd figured it would come to that sooner or later. So he wrote a letter to Jim Trevis explaining what he feared would happen, and sent me to town to mail it."

"Dad never got anything like that!" exclaimed Carol.

"I know. I was waylaid, roped off my horse." Something in his voice sent a cold ripple up her spine. "When I came to, I was afoot and the letter was gone. I walked home. And I found that Silverdust had been taken there. They'd tied him up and spooked him. He was wild and lathered, still shaking and kicking at. . . ." He could not go on. Carol caught the movement of his hand to cover his eyes, as though to blot out a horror seen anew.

In sympathetic silence she waited for him to fight down emotion. The moon Stanley had promised was rising, a great golden globe edging over the top of a hill. It changed the velvety darkness of the night into a silvery translucence. It struck a gleam from a buckle on the cowboy's hat, brought out in silhouette the set of his head and broad, sloping shoulders.

Involuntarily Carol opened her lips to suggest that he draw into the shade of the rock against which she leaned, let it go as he took down his hand and resumed speech.

"I was tryin' to quiet Silverdust, taking him away, when one of Stanley's punchers 'happened' along. He swore it'd looked like I was doing just the opposite. Mike's four hands were across the river, building fence. They believed like everyone else that I was guilty. I knew I didn't have a chance so I beat it. I've been holing up in the hills ever since, hoping that when Mike's folks showed up. . . ." He halted suddenly.

Carol saw his head turn sharply leftward. A prickle of alarm raced up her spine. She had heard nothing herself, yet. The specula-

DILLON *MOSE SMITH* *GREG STANLEY*

tion went no farther, for he whipped over. The sudden impact of his weight almost knocked the breath out of her lungs as he hurled himself upon her, one long arm flattening her to the ground.

Simultaneously a six-shooter barked from somewhere close. Carol heard a whistle overhead, the ricochet of lead from the rock which had been her back rest. Another followed in swift succession. Before its whine had faded Toby was rolling over, firing at the orange flash.

From out of the night there came a choking cry, then silence. But for a long time Toby lay still. Carol, with the weight of his arm across her, wondered if he could hear the pounding of her heart. He had lost his hat in his wild dive. Against her cheek his hair felt soft and fine.

Suddenly he moved. "Stay down," he breathed and, bent low, dashed for the next bit of cover. No flash of orange greeted the maneuver, no boom of gunfire split the air. After a moment his call drifted back. "You can come now, ma'am."

Quickly Carol joined him. He had holstered his weapon. Behind a tall clump of sage he stood over the sprawled body of a man whose face in moonlight was familiar. Mose Smith.

"So he did leave someone behind to watch!" exclaimed Carol. She put a hand on the cowboy's arm. "They don't want to capture you, do they, Toby? They went to kill you while you're believed guilty!"

He flung her a glance of grim amusement. "And now they'll have another killing to chalk up against me."

But Smith was not yet dead. As they bent over him his eyes opened, bearded lips curled back from his teeth. "You'll pay for this!" he panted. "Damn you, Lane! Greg'll fix you! And he'll fix her, too—damn lyin' wench! She'll talk small . . . when he . . . gets hold of her!" Cursing, he choked and was still.

Carol was trembling when the cowboy lifted her to her feet. He said abruptly, "Howcome you're alone, Carol? Why didn't your dad come with you?"

With an effort she answered. "Dad's tied up with a beef contract. Has a big delivery to make by the fifteenth. Martin said it had taken time to locate us and Uncle Mike was already buried, so I came on. Dad plans on joining me in a couple of weeks."

"That'll be too late," murmured Toby. As Carol stared he added insistently. "If you wired that you were in danger, would he drop everything and come?"

"Of course. The outfit would carry on in a pinch. But. . . ."

"Then you head back to Sagetown and do that," interrupted Toby. "Tell him to hustle because you are in danger. Didn't you savvy what Smith said? Stanley's all set to grab you and there's no telling what he'll do to get his way."

"You mean he'd actually . . .! Why, he'd be crazy to try anything like that, Toby! This isn't the '70s or '80s. This is 1938!"

"The year hasn't anything to do with it," retorted the cowboy. "And if Stanley isn't crazy, he's desperate. There's not much difference. He's in up to his neck and has got to bull through." Toby pushed back his hat. Moonlight revealed the earnestness in his face. "Go back to town and register at the hotel. Stay there until your dad comes. The only place you're safe is amongst people. He'd of grabbed you a while ago if there hadn't been outsiders in his posse so he didn't dare tip his hand."

"What'll you do?" demanded Carol.

"Smith's got a horse around somewhere. They're lookin' for me in the opposite direction so I'll circle back to town. Ought to get there about—" he took a watch out of a shirt pocket—"three o'clock. The hotel's the tallest building in town and sets by itself. By moving around I can get a look at all sides without coming in close. Between three and five o'clock you blink your room lights every 15 minutes. That'll be a signal that you're okay. When your dad shows up, leave the light burnin' steady."

"And then?" persisted Carol.

"I'll get in touch with you and we'll plan from there. The main thing now is to put you out of Stanley's reach."

He was not to be swerved from this objective. Although he accepted gladly a gift of blankets and grub, in ten minutes the remainder of Carol's belongings had been packed into the rumble seat. Carol slid behind the wheel. With the motor idling she faced the cowboy, oddly reluctant to leave him.

They had known each other but a short time, yet they were two alone entangled in a web of murder and trickery. There was so great a chance that they would never see each other again. Impulsively Carol gave him her hand. "So long, pardner," she whispered. "Good luck!"

She let out the clutch and the car moved forward. Sagebrush slapped its sides, crackled beneath tires. Then she was out in the road. The moon was high in the heavens by this time, its light so bright that she traveled comfortably at a good rate of speed towards Sagetown.

Yet she was to go no farther than a few miles. Swinging about a curve, she spied an obstruction in the road barely in time to jam on brakes and avoid a smash-up. Swiftly she backed, got out. Her teeth came together, for it was a large cottonwood tree that blocked her path, its butt severed cleanly by a crosscut saw.

Toby Lane had been right about Greg Stanley, it seemed. The renegade sheriff *was* someone to be reckoned with. He hadn't taken it for granted that she'd go on to the 2 Bar Cross just because she had said she would. He was canny and tricky, which meant that whoever had cut down this tree would have orders to close in at once.

Swiftly Carol cramped the front wheels, hoping to be able to circle the obstruction. But she had traveled only a few yards when two horsemen rode suddenly in front of her. Her heart sank. Once more on the road she might have made a run for it. Here, because of boulders and rough ground, she was trapped.

The horsemen trotted closer. Realizing that she must betray no understanding of the true situation, Carol called out mildly, "What happened here?"

The pair did not come to the side of the car. They reined up directly in front of it. Pulled-down hat brims half obscured their features. The bigger one said bluntly, "Head back the way you come!"

"Oh, I can make it around," asserted Carol brightly, in keeping with her rôle. Experimentally she shifted gears, trod on the gas feed.

But neither horseman made a move to clear her path. Instead a gleam of steel appeared in the spokesman's hand. Above the hum of the motor his voice rang out threateningly. "Want your tires plugged? Turn around like I said!"

Carol could only obey. And though she harbored a swift hope of outdistancing them and thus escaping, even if in the opposite direction, it was promptly squelched. No sooner was she in the road again when a six-shooter barked. Abruptly the left rear side of the roadster sagged.

"Reckon that'll keep you from runnin' off," remarked her captor. "Keep a-movin', girlie!"

For what seemed hours Carol drove along, conscious of the horsemen trotting behind, gritting her teeth with rage. The flopping of the ruined tire and thump of the rim grated on her nerves. Her fingers itched for the gun in her pocket.

Yet she was sensible enough to recognize the hopelessness of attempting to bluff or outshoot two desperadoes with so small a weapon. At close range it could be vitally effective.

So long as she could keep possession of it she had an ace in the hole.

It was a relief to be guided at last through an opened gate. Shortly the road dipped downward. She saw a cluster of buildings at the bottom of the hill, the house a big, frame affair with a stone chimney etched against the starry sky.

In front of this she was ordered to halt. Her captor took time to locate her suitcase. With it in hand he ushered her through a kitchen and to a lighted bedroom beyond. "The window's nailed shut," he announced laconically. "Breakin' it'd only be a waste of time."

He put down her bag and departed. Outside the door a heavy bar dropped into place. "Well!" murmured Carol, sinking to the edge of the bed. In addition the room contained a mirror and chest of drawers on which stood a kerosene lamp, wash bowl and pitcher of water. "Well!" she murmured again and put her hand to the pistol in her pocket.

At least she hadn't been searched. And when it became evident that she was not to be molested further that night, she took off her boots and stretched out on the bed. She did not expect to sleep but she did. Her last thought was to wonder what Toby Lane would do after he had waited for signal lights to flash from the Sagetown Hotel, and waited in vain.

She was awakened early by the sound of voices in the next room, a rattle of crockery. Guessing that the ranch hands were at breakfast, she arose hurriedly, washed and ran a comb through her hair. She had hardly finished before she heard the tramp of departing feet. Almost at once there came a knock at her door.

"Open it," she called.

Greg Stanley did so, halting on the threshold. Daylight revealed him to be about 35, not bad-looking in a sharp-featured fashion. But Carol still didn't like his eyes nor the way they took her in.

"So you're the one!" she exclaimed angrily. "I figured those men were acting on orders. Would you mind telling me what this is about and where I am?"

"You're at my place, the Circle Bar," Stanley answered. "But before I explain the rest. . . ." He stepped aside. "How about some breakfast? Our cook quit last week and the boys have been taking turns at it temporary. So I won't guarantee—"

Carol cut through his attempt to skirt the subject. "Just what are you after?" she demanded.

Briefly their eyes clashed. Then Stanley said, "All right. I'll tell you. Twenty years ago Mike Trevis beat us Stanleys out of the 2 Bar Cross. All this time we've tried to get it back. Now that Trevis is gone I aim to do it. I had you brought here last night so I could hold you until you saw certain things my way."

Carol smiled scornfully. "You're forgetting that I have a family, friends."

He met her smile with one of his own. "I didn't go into this blind. I learned all about you Trevises through a private dick once when Mike had pneumonia. Besides your dad, I found you had a foster brother, Bill, and an uncle, Charlie Jordan. Three for me to contend with. While I was figuring how to do it, Mike pulled through. Then luck played my way. Lane disposed of Mike just at a time when your menfolks would be tied up at home with a beef delivery. There was every reason to believe you'd come north alone."

Narrowly he watched her. Carol felt the clawing of cold fear as she fought to keep her expression unaltered. If she had needed any substantiation of Toby's charge that Stanley had murdered her uncle, here it was from Stanley's own lips. Yet she dared not let him guess she even suspected he might have deliberately timed his "luck" and used Toby Lane as a scapegoat.

She said, "What did Smith mean about Martin keeping an eye out for me in Eagle City?"

Stanley's wary look faded. "He was to meet you, pretend he was taking you to the 2 Bar Cross and bring you here," he explained readily. "He's also handling the legal end so you won't be able to wiggle out of what you sign."

"I'm not signing anything!" asserted Carol staunchly. "And if I did, you can't hold me forever. Do you think I wouldn't tell I was forced into it, wouldn't fight you?"

"Martin swears he can sew you up so tight you won't have a chance," replied Stanley. "But I'm not worrying about that any more. Now that I've seen you—" again his gaze took her in, the slim, rounded sturdiness of her figure, the fresh, soft tan of her face with its black-lashed grey eyes and frame of shining brown curls—"it strikes me there's a safer, pleasanter way. You won't talk, not even to your dad or brother, because the first thing

my wife will learn will be to keep her mouth shut!"

With that he turned, walked to the table where dirty dishes had been stacked aside and two clean places set. Carol stared after him. It was just part of a plan to scare her into submission, of course. It was too absurd to be anything else.

Yet she recalled Toby's warning of this man's ruthlessness and could not fight off a cold feeling about her heart. She took her place at the table with a show of calm. Served by a hard-faced hand of 40 odd, she set out to eat a good breakfast, determined to appear neither worried nor intimidated.

Stanley finished first. "Sorry our deal will have to be postponed a little," he apologized ironically. "But Lane slipped through our fingers last night and I can't neglect my duty. Dillon, here can show you around if you'd like some air and exercise."

After he had departed Carol toyed with her food. If only they'd leave her with this one guard! From the interior of the house came the sound of a bell, three shrill rings. Carol almost dropped her cup. A telephone!

Stanley had told of one on the 2 Bar Cross. Naturally there'd be one here, too, since the ranches were but five miles apart. And though it was evidently one of the old-fashioned kind, giving a certain number of rings for each party on the line, it was still a means of communication with the outside world.

Afraid that she would betray the excitement tingling through her, Carol got up and sauntered to the door. Dillon followed. Outside he fell into step at her side. Large cottonwoods shaded the yard and its many buildings. In front of one she took for the bunkhouse stood a number of saddled horses. Squatting, sitting on benches, a group of men smoked and listened to Greg Stanley who seemed to be giving last minute instructions.

Carol thought of Toby Lane, pitted alone against this force, shivered and turned towards the corrals. The nearest held several horses, one tethered to the manger.

It was a grey stallion, tall, with clean, beautiful lines. He had a magnificent silver mane and tail. With neither a dapple nor a black hair upon him, he looked as though he'd been dusted with some wonderful silvery powder.

Dusted . . . silver . . . Carol's eyes widened. Of course. This was the stallion that had been used to frame Toby for Mike Trevis' murder. This was Silverdust!

"What—what a beautiful horse!" she exclaimed weakly.

"Yeah." To her surprise Dillon answered, as though unwillingly sharing her fascination. "But I wouldn't advise you to get too close to him. That's the critter that done for Mike Trevis!"

"Oh!" Carol swallowed hard. "What's he doing here?"

A sly grin crossed the man's face. "Lane's crazy about that horse. When he learns Greg's got him, chances are he'll try to make off with him some night and—"

He stiffened, whirled. Heart leaping, Carol whirled also to face the direction from which had come suddenly a blast of gunfire. She saw nothing but a stand of cottonwoods bordering the base of a low, irregular bluff.

The next moment there were noises of activity close at hand, pounding hoofs, curses as excited horses danced away from lunging figures snatching at trailing reins. Then Stanley clattered across the yard at the head of his gang, yelling to Carol's guard as he passed, "Get her inside!"

Instantly the girl found herself propelled towards the house. Dillon's grip made it plain he would as soon drag her as not. Yet she held back all she could, eyes following the group of horsemen racing away. A single rider shot out of the timber. She saw that he was doubled over, reeling in the saddle.

The next moment she was shoved through the kitchen and into her room. The door slammed, the bar dropped into place.

Carol flew to the window. But she found her view restricted to cultivated fields that were bordered on one side by the low bluffs, on the other by a patch of timber. Two hundred yards away lay the edge of a grain field, a wide, rippling sea of growth about three feet high.

All through the house there was silence, a tense, brooding expectancy. Carol laid her forehead against the window-pane, tortured by the fear of what might be taking place outside. Her throat was tight, her eyes ached from staring when suddenly she stiffened. The very beating of her heart seemed to stop.

Into sight had moved a man afoot, not the fellow she had seen on the horse—a tall, dark-clad figure, familiar even at this distance. He had come from the timber bordering one side of the grain field, was making for it at a queer, wobbling run. In wide-eyed horror Carol watched the unsteadiness of his gait

grow more pronounced, saw him stagger and go down to his knees.

"Oh, get up! Get up!" she whispered frantically. "It's just a few more feet! Just. . . ."

But after a brief moment of swaying, of trying desperately to creep, Toby crumpled to the ground. Although with all her strength Carol willed him to move, to crawl those few remaining feet into the cover of the grain field, he continued to lie still in the open, helpless prey of any enemy who should happen upon him.

MOTIONLESS, Toby watched Carol's roadster pull away, tail light winking red through the sage, finally disappearing as she turned into the road. As the hum of the motor swiftly receded he set about locating Mose Smith's horse.

It took all of 15 minutes but he came upon the animal at last, a leggy sorrel, tethered to brush a good distance to the east. Across the saddle he laid the body of its owner, tied the supplies Carol had given him behind and, leading the animal, struck back towards the hills out of which he had this night been driven.

He stopped at the first big tree, used Smith's own lariat to hoist his body up to the fork and fasten it there, not only safe from coyotes but hidden by full-leaved branches.

Smith would be missed, of course. But the longer it took them to find his body, the better it would be for Carol. They would have no grounds to suspect her of any connection with his disappearance until they learned how soon he had died after being left to watch her camp. If they found that out while she was alone here and unprotected, her life would be in danger. For Stanley would guess that she had harbored Toby Lane, realize that she must know the truth about her uncle's murder.

A worried frown drawing his brows together, Toby headed west at a good clip, not circling southward until he was high in the hills with the bulk of the Mustang Mountains, huge and black, before him. Below the town he worked his way once more to the edge of the level valley. Shortly after three o'clock he reined up on a timbered hill overlooking Sagetown.

In moonlight it was an area of darkened structures with here and there a point of light identifying a saloon or pool hall. The hotel stood forth, conspicuous because of its three stories. By changing position at 15-minute

intervals Toby circled the town widely, covering all four sides of the building so that regardless of where the girl's room was situated, he could not miss her signal.

The only thing was, it didn't come. By five o'clock the moonlit sheen had changed to the dull grey of early daylight. By five o'clock Toby was back on the timbered hill, faced with an inevitable conclusion.

Carol had never reached Sagetown. Only Stanley could have kept her from doing so. He had her at this moment, probably on the Circle Bar, the safest, most logical place in which to hold her.

Toby's jaw set. It did no good to argue that the girl was safe so long as Stanley didn't know about Smith. He might learn about him at any time. He would certainly lay down terms. He would demand and threaten. Knowing Carol, Toby realized she would stand up to him pluckily until Stanley reached the point where he would stop at nothing to break her down.

Come dark again, reflected Toby, he'd make a try himself at getting a message off to Jim Trevis. In the meantime, Carol had to be gotten out of Greg Stanley's clutches.

Through hills bathed with the red glare of a rising sun he made his way, angling toward the Circle Bar. Dangerous business in daylight, he realized, yet if most of Stanley's men were out on posse duty and still unaware that he'd doubled back, he had a chance. Besides, the river bottom in which the ranch buildings lay provided plenty of cover by way of timber and brush.

Within two hours Toby had forded the stream. Reining up behind a thicket of buckrush, he debated the advisability of going on afoot. While he would have a better chance of remaining unseen, he would run the risk of being cut off from his mount if something went wrong. He had about decided to press on and gamble on luck, when a thud of hoofs came to his ear.

On his back trail, it indicated that someone else had forded the river and was heading now for the Circle Bar. If he could stay hidden, hold his mount's nose until the other went by. . . .

But even as Toby moved to dismount, the sorrel's ears flicked forward. He nickered. The advancing tread of hoofs silenced. There came a startled query. "That you, Smith?"

As Toby drew his gun he reflected that this newcomer must have spotted him from a distance, mistaken his identity because of the direction in which he'd been heading and the horse he rode. Still he was suspicious. While he couldn't be sure the horse he'd just heard was packing a rider, couldn't judge the exact position from which the sound had come, he'd be sure to investigate.

He did. He moved into sight about the thicket, froze with his six-shooter pointed straight at Toby's chest. Since both held leveled weapons they should have fired simultaneously.

But where the newcomer had been merely wary, Toby was grimly prepared. His bullet struck even as the other pulled trigger. Toby heard the slug whiz overhead. The Circle Bar man doubled over but did not fall. Nevertheless, Toby held further fire, knowing him to be badly hit.

His forbearance brought disaster upon his own head for, clutching the saddle horn, the other lifted a convulsed face and snapped a shot. A weight caught at Toby's left side, swinging it back so that he almost lost balance and spilled from the saddle. Desperately he fought to stick to a plunging mount. When the other horse bolted, rider drooping over its neck, he was in no position to do anything about it.

High-lifed and excitable, the sorrel went into a real fit of bucking. Toby's knee slammed into a tree. The world went black and he had a sensation of flying. When it passed he was sprawled on the ground. A fading drum of hoofs told of the sorrel's flight.

At least he'd stampeded away from the Circle Bar, Toby reflected, dragging himself to his feet. His knee felt numb but his shoulder was throbbing. He could feel the wetness of blood soaking into his clothes. In a moment it would be dripping, leaving a trail.

Because he had to have another mount, and because the thought of Carol was still uppermost in his mind, Toby plunged into brush, making for the Circle Bar corrals. There was strategy in this move, too, since he would be expected to run away from, not towards, the buildings.

Crouched in a thicket he heard the thunder and shouting of Stanley's gang taking up his trail, realized as it kept on and commenced to fade that they were following the tracks of the bolting sorrel. They was liable to take them away for some time, since the heavy growth of the river bottom would make it

necessary to come well up with the animal before they could tell its saddle was empty.

Dizzy and sick, he went on, found himself presently at the edge of the timber. Beyond, a grain field beckoned invitingly. If he could reach it, rest just a moment in its tall concealing growth, he might be able to line out a course of action.

He tried hard but his weight became too much for weakening legs. He felt them melt beneath him. Pain seared him as he hit the ground, then he knew no more. . . .

SOME way he's given them the slip. But unless I can do something they'll come back and find him—and he'll die!"

Carol whispered the words without realizing she had spoken until their echo droned down the corridors of her brain, flooding her body with a dreadful ache. White-faced, she took the pistol from her pocket, with her other hand began a furious pounding on the door.

For interminable moments it brought no result. Then above the racket she was making, Dillon's voice roared, "Stop that! What'n hell d'you want?"

"Let me come out into the kitchen," begged Carol. "I want to talk to someone. I want to know what's happened—what that shooting was about."

Silence followed the request. Carol turned a calculating glance upon the window. If she could be sure Dillon was the only man left behind. . . . Her heart started to pump furiously as there came a fumbling at the bar holding her in.

"Guess that can't do no harm," came Dillon's decision. "Greg sent Rimrock Jones out to hunt up Mose Smith. He musta run into Lane instead down in the timber. Anyway, Rimrock got plugged. I just helped put him in the pickup so's Davis could run him in to the Doc. Greg—"

He had been unbarring, throwing open the door as he talked. Now his garrulity dwindled to open-mouthed silence. In ludicrous astonishment he stared at the small gun menacing his heart.

"Get back!" commanded Carol. "Quick!"

He shook himself a bit. "And I never once thought of you packin' a popgun!" he exclaimed harshly, in evident self-disgust. "But that damn—" He choked, reeled backward as the muzzle of the gun flipped upward and spat.

"Over by the stove and turn around!" ordered Carol.

Abruptly grey-faced, he obeyed, shivering beneath the drip of blood from a bullet-torn ear lobe. Swiftly the girl snatched up a chunk of stove wood, tightened her lips. An instant later Dillon lay on the floor, no longer capable of turning tables upon her when she went to tie him up. This she did with dish towels and the small clothes line behind the stove on which they had hung.

Toby was stirring by the time she reached him. With frantic fingers she sought his wound, sobbing in relief as she found it high in the left side, close to the armpit. The bleeding had already stopped. His eyes opened as she pulled his clothing together.

"Carol?" he whispered dazedly. "How'd you—get here?"

"Never mind that now. You've got to get up!" She laid hold as though she would lift him bodily. "We've got to get away before Stanley and his gang come back!"

The words seemed to penetrate his half-stupor. He sat up. With her help he got to his feet, stood there swaying. "Corral," he muttered, "got to have—horses!"

Drunkenly they set out. And as they walked Toby's head seemed to clear, he appeared to regain strength so that after a few steps he traveled under his own power, despite a limp. "This wound ain't much," he panted. "Wouldn't have put me out alone. But I got a knock in the knee. . . ."

His voice trailed off. He stared through the bars of the horse corral at the grey stallion tethered inside. "Silverdust!" he whispered. The blaze in his face told Carol how much the magnificent animal meant to him.

"Will he carry you bareback?" she inquired anxiously. "There's no saddle but mine." She gestured towards her roadster still standing in front of the house. Her gaze lingered upon it wistfully. But there would be no time to change a tire.

"He'll have to," Toby answered her question. "Get your outfit while I catch one of these broncs for you."

He had captured a bay by the time she was back, panting beneath her load. Snatching the bridle he ordered her into the house to the telephone. "Your dad," he explained tersely. "Try to call the Sagetown Depot—send that wire, charges reversed."

Carol raced to the house. She found the telephone in an office off the living room, got

through to the Sagetown telegrapher. Realizing that it would be unwise to mention names she worded her message simply, "Need you. Come to Sagetown at once. Hurry. Carol."

Conscientiously the other repeated each word, checked the spelling of her father's name, the Arizona address. In all it took up six minutes, each one of which ticked off with unbearable slowness before an agonized gaze fastened upon a wall clock.

But still Toby had raised no cry of alarm. Flaming with excitement Carol flew to the kitchen. Oblivious of the trussed-up figure on the floor, struggling and eyeing her balefully, she yanked open cupboard doors. In the flour bin she found an empty sack, proceeded to tumble food into it—a can of coffee, bacon, a loaf of bread.

One door opened upon an assortment of stock remedies and first aid supplies. Carol seized upon a wide roll of surgical gauze as a piercing cry came from outside. "Carol! They're coming!"

Flinging the meagerly filled sack over her shoulder, she fled.

Outside she found Toby already astride the prancing stallion bareback, holding the reins of the saddled bay. Out of the timber to the east had burst a band of horsemen, lashing their mounts. Yells assailed her ears as she vaulted into the saddle. The stallion lunged ahead, followed by the bay. In great scrambling leaps they took the road climbing out of the river bottom.

Not until they had passed through the gate and turned into the main road did Carol look back. "They're losing ground!" she cried exultantly.

"Played their horses out runnin' down my bronc," reasoned Toby. "But they're still in rifle range!"

Even as he spoke a crash sounded. Lead droned close. The sounds were repeated, magnified as others of Stanley's party joined the attack. The stallion's ears flattened. He began to stretch out to draw away from the bay as easily as though the latter were not running his best. It took all Toby's strength on the halter rope, all his influence over the animal, to check his speed.

Behind, rifle reports continued to shatter the air. Carol's pony made a convulsive leap, sagged in the hind quarters. As the girl uttered a despairing cry a savage yell rose from their pursuers which sent shivers up and down her spine.

Toby swung Silverdust close. "Behind me!" he shouted.

Clinging to her sack, thankful now for its light weight, Carol kicked free of her stirrups. She steadied herself by the horn, drew her right foot up to the saddle seat, reached for Toby, and leaped. She made it safely to a seat behind him. At loosened reins Silverdust shot ahead.

When next Carol ventured a backward look her blood sang, for with every stride they were pulling away from their pursuers. As she watched Stanley's party halted, turned back. "They're giving up!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Going back for fresh mounts is a better guess," retorted Toby. "Greg prob'ly half killed the one he's on beating the timber for me."

And he was right. Enflamed by the thought of his quarry right at his fingertips, Stanley had driven his helpers relentlessly in an effort to rout Toby out of hiding. By the time he realized he had been tricked, not a mount among them was in shape for a long, hard chase. Within a mile Stanley's roan commenced to slow. His breath whistled through distended nostrils, pumped in and out by lungs taxed almost to bursting.

Yet not until the bay went down and Silverdust swept on with his double burden, was the renegade lawman able to tear himself away from the chase. Pulling up he shouted, "We'll go back for fresh broncs, boys! We can afford to now that the stud's packin' double. He'll damn soon play out and we'll run him down easy!"

"I ain't so sure, boss," muttered one, though with his mates he accepted the order gladly. "That grey's greased lightnin'!"

Stung, although the stumbling gait of his roan warned that he had no other choice, Stanley flung a glance over his shoulder. And as he watched Silverdust carry his quarry away, grow momentarily smaller, the rage, frustration, and fear of defeat deep inside burst suddenly into the flame of a terrible hate.

"I'll have his hide!" he ground out passionately. "Do you hear that, boys? Two hundred bucks to anybody who puts a slug into that damned horse!"

AHEAD, unaware that open season had been proclaimed on the gallant animal carrying them the fugitives held to a swift pace until they reached the hills. Sil-

verdust was sweating by that time, starting to blow. To breathe him Toby slowed to a walk, heading straight towards the mountains.

At the first spring Carol wanted to stop and dress his shoulder. But this Toby refused to permit. "As long as I can stick to this horse we're going on," he declared grimly. "Stanley'll be on our trail like a bloodhound and every minute counts."

"But you've lost blood and you're in pain!" protested Carol. "You'll be burning up with fever before long."

"Can't help it," replied he stubbornly. "See that big canyon ahead? A trail winds up it to a bench. We've got to cross it, work down into Ribbon Canyon and follow it south. A mile'll take us across the county line, ten miles into Carson City. It's a good-sized place, even got an airport. And Sheriff Brimhall is known as a square-shooter. If we can surrender to him, it's a cinch he won't turn us over to Stanley without investigating, and that'll give us what we need most. Time."

"You mean it'll give *me* time," corrected Carol. "Time to get plenty of help up here to block Stanley's scheme against me. But it means putting yourself in jail to face trial for a murder you didn't commit. What makes you think I'll agree to that, Toby?"

He seemed not to notice the undercurrent of strong feeling in her voice. "I ain't afraid to stand trial in an honest court, with honest backing," he said earnestly. "What put me on the run was the way Stanley made his play. I knew that if I let him arrest me, I'd never get to town alive. That shows the evidence against me ain't the kind that'd make conviction certain or he wouldn't want my hide so bad. I couldn't give up to Sheriff Brimhall before because he'd of figured I was telling a batch of lies and turned me right over to Stanley. With your story to back mine up now, it'll be different." He added abruptly, "Did you get that wire off?"

"I made the call to Sagetown all right. But . . ." Carol hesitated. "How do we know it'll go any farther? Stanley seems to have thought of everything. That telegrapher could be bought off."

"Could be," admitted Toby. "He's new, so I don't know him. But whether that message goes through or not won't matter unless we make it to Carson City. It's our only chance to keep out of Stanley's hands until your dad has time to get here and take care of you."

Unless we make it to Carson City! Carol took in the weary droop of Toby's shoulders and felt her heart grow heavy. He was hurt. It was a foregone conclusion that he had not eaten since last night. There was no telling how long he'd gone without sleep. And despite his insistence that he was all right, grit and determination could drive a failing body just so far.

The trail up the canyon proved steep and rough. To spare the stallion Carol slid to the ground, started to climb afoot. It was significant that Toby neither objected nor offered to walk himself. He was hunched forward, gripping the animal's mane. His flushed face, twisted with pain, warned that her fear for him was not exaggerated.

On the first level a tiny stream crossed the trail. Toby was glad to drink from the brim of Carol's sombrero. He smiled his thanks crookedly when she bathed his face. Surprisedly she noted that his eyes were neither black nor brown, but blue, a dark midnight blue, framed by thick lashes. Shaven he would be, she decided, very nearly handsome.

"Looks like I'm going to be more a burden than a help," he complained bitterly.

So plainly was his concern for her alone that a wave of tenderness swept the girl. "Never mind pardner," she said comfortingly. "Just you stick to that horse!"

The next four hours proved a nightmare of toil, of alternating hope and despair. Gradually Toby drifted into a semi-conscious state so that it was necessary to be on guard constantly lest he pitch to the ground. Supporting him, guiding their mount, hanging on to their few provisions soon had Carol on the borderline of fatigue and desperation.

More than once she was tempted to drop the sack. But not only would they need the food should they be compelled to hole up somewhere: a dropped sack would prove a guide post to pursuers who might possibly have lost the trail. Where they were, how close behind, she could only guess.

Presently she halted at the rim of Ribbon Canyon. Her heart sank as she surveyed the immense chasm yawning at their feet. The trail down was easily located but incredibly steep, appallingly narrow. To try riding down it double would be foolhardy, to walk beside the cowboy, supporting him, impossible.

Yet, even if she succeeded in bringing Toby out of his stupor, would he stay that way long enough to reach the canyon floor? Or

would he slip back into insensibility, slide from the stallion's back and hurtle to his death?

A sob broke from her lips. In that moment she knew why, from the very beginning, she had been on this cowboy's side, why she had believed everything he said without question. "Toby!" she whispered. "Toby Lane!" Then, poignantly, "But there's no way around it, darling. I've got to wake you up!"

She shook him until he groaned, lifted a feeble hand in protest. But semi-consciousness would not do. Biting her lip, she persisted until Toby raised his head and she could see the light of reason in his eyes through his pain.

"Toby, listen!" she begged. "We're on the edge of Ribbon Canyon. The trail down is too narrow for me to walk beside you. You've got to stick to Silverdust all by yourself, and that means you must stay conscious! Do you understand, darling? You've *got* to hang on for me!"

Gripping his hands, making no effort to conceal the glory of the revelation which had just come to her, Carol gazed up into his face. And in the cowboy's eyes incredulity gave way to a light so joyous and adoring that despite the gravity of their predicament, color warmed into Carol's cheeks.

"The Devil himself couldn't shake me off—if you really mean what you seem to be saying," he avowed softly.

"I mean it," she assured him.

"Then lead on, honey. And don't worry!"

After 15 minutes of swift descent, of slipping and leaping to keep clear of the stallion's hoofs, Carol reached the canyon floor. For the first time she was able to look back at Toby. He had both hands tangled in Silverdust's mane. His eyes were closed and perspiration stood out on his forehead. "Keep going!" he muttered, and slumped over his mount's neck. Before Carol could reach him he toppled to the right, folded limply as he hit the ground, and lay still.

"Toby!" Sick with fear, Carol caught at him.

But he was not dead, merely unconscious, and though her heart started to beat again she recognized the gravity of their plight. Unless she could revive him so that he could help get himself back upon the stallion, there was no going on. He was a good one hundred and ninety pounds of brawn and bone to her hundred and ten, and she could never manage a dead lift.

Ribbon Creek was a shallow trickle of water now but clear and cold. Carol splashed Toby profusely without success. No getting around it, she told herself at last. The only thing left was to find some sort of shelter and pray that their enemies neither guessed their destination nor picked up their trail.

Leading Silverdust, she started down canyon. It seemed a long way before she found a place that would do, a shallow cave in a curve of the wall, hollowed out by the mountain stream in time of freshet. It was dry now, floored with sand.

Carol tethered the stallion and went back for Toby. Dragging him over rough ground, a foot at a time, proved the hardest job she'd ever tackled. She was exhausted by the time she got him to the cave. She lay beside him a long time before she could muster the will to get up again.

Silverdust had already drunk his fill, but he would need grass, too. Carol had to take him quite a piece farther before she located a spot in which he could graze with the end of his halter rope tethered to a stout bush. At that, because of the shortness of the rope, he would have to be shifted about at regular intervals.

For the first time, then, Carol found time to examine Toby's wound. Not so bad, she told herself, taking heart. An inch to the left and the bullet would have pierced his arm. As it was, it had struck at an angle, torn cleanly through flesh and grooved his under arm as it went on. It had not bled alarmingly. She felt of Toby's face and found it not nearly so hot as she had expected.

Delving into her sack for the roll of gauze filched from the Circle Bar cupboard, she murmured, "I've a hunch it's more exhaustion that's got you down than that bullet hole, Toby boy." As the hours passed she became convinced that she was right, for he slept straight through the rest of the day and on into the night, impervious even to the cold which came with darkness.

Without blankets, not daring to build a fire, Carol really suffered. The fear of pneumonia for Toby tormented her. Yet to stick it out was their only hope. By morning he might have regained strength enough to go on.

Luck seemed with them. As the first sunbeams penetrated the depths of the canyon Toby awoke, stiff and chilled, ravenously hungry, but able to get up. He did so as soon as he realized where they were.

"I told you to keep going Carol!" he ex-

claimed in dismay. "Stanley and his gang might be sneaking up on us right now! They wouldn't bust down canyon the first thing in the morning. One of them would scout ahead in case we'd camped last night. Jones knew he'd winged me—if he was able to tell it. They—"

"Please!" interrupted Carol. "You passed out and fell off of Silverdust. You couldn't help it any more than I could lift you back on. We had to stop and I'm glad, now that I see how much good the rest has done you. Our luck has held so far. Maybe it'll see us through."

But it didn't. Afterwards Carol realized it had been too much to expect. Their escape, the fact that they'd gotten this far, was remarkable enough. She should have known that once Stanley picked up Silverdust's track in the hills and made certain they were heading towards Ribbon Canyon, he would guess their objective. Hadn't he anticipated other moves, such as her attempt to return to Sagetown?

These and many more things Carol was to remind herself of within the hour. Now she was happy over Toby's physical improvement, buoyed up with the belief that the worst of their ordeal was over. "You grab something to eat," she directed gaily. "I'll get Silverdust and we'll be on our way. Carson City next stop!"

Reveling in the welcome warmth of the sun, she hurried down canyon. The stallion greeted her with a nicker. While he drank the girl washed face and hands, ran fingers through tangled curls.

In all, she was away about five minutes. Yet, in that brief time, for them the picture was changed from hope to grim despair. On her way back, the stallion's hoofs crunching gravel to send ahead an announcement of their coming she heard Toby's voice lift suddenly in a frantic cry.

"Run, Carol! Run! Don't come up!" The warning cry then ended with a dreadful abruptness.

Carol froze in her tracks, stunned. Before she could recover a man moved into sight, six-shooter leveled. It was Dillon, a gauze and adhesive dressing on his ear, eyes alight with malice.

"Your cute stunt didn't get you much after all, did it?" he taunted, adding an epithet that turned Carol's face red, then white. "Now you dig that popgun out and toss it here on the ground. And no tricks d'you hear? I'd plug you as quick as I would a man!"

Carol knew he meant it. Whether Stanley had given him a good going over for permitting her to escape, or whether his hate sprang from the fact that she had bested him, it was real and dangerous. Without a word she obeyed his order, watched him pocket the small gun. At a jerk of his head she preceded him upstream, still leading the nervous stallion.

The scene that met her eyes caused her already heavy heart to sink lower. In front of their night's shelter stood Stanley and two more henchmen. Dully Carol reflected that he must have divided his force in order to cover more country. Then her heart was wrung by the sight of Toby.

Dripping water he was climbing unassisted, to his feet. He spread them wide to steady himself. Carol saw a trickle of blood at one corner of his mouth. She remembered how his warning cry had choked off, knew that he had been struck down with a brutal disregard for his injury.

Rage struck the needed spark to Carol's fighting spirit. Eye to eye she met Stanley when the latter burst out furiously, "You lyin' cat! Acting innocent when all the time you was hiding Lane, throwing in with him! We found Smith's body. How'd you like to be slapped into jail on a charge of accessory to murder?"

Carol opened her mouth to tell him to go ahead if he thought he could make it stick, caught herself just in time. To taunt him with a reminder that he dared not risk dealing with them lawfully would be madness.

But Stanley had been merely blowing off steam. When she failed to answer he said sneeringly, "All wised up, huh? You know I've got to wind it up my way—the quicker the better! Sam!" His voice cracked. "Go fetch the horses up!"

As the man obeyed, stepping around the bulge of the canyon wall and out of sight, Stanley jerked his head at Dillon. "You, too," he ordered. "Take the girl. Put her up in front of you and light out. The rest of us'll follow directly."

Dillon nodded, holstered his gun. Carol flashed a glance at Toby. What she read in his face crystallized alarm to horrible certainty. Dillon would have taken her but a short distance when they'd hear gunfire. When the main party caught up with them it would

be with Toby's lifeless body dangling across a saddle!

Vividly the grim picture flashed before her, terrible piercing. "No!" she screamed involuntarily, causing Silverdust to snort and rear as she leaped back from Dillon's touch. Her heel caught on a rock and she went down, the stallion's halter rope slipping through her hand. One hand plunged into water as she landed in the creek bed, the other clawed gravel.

Swift as thought she shifted her weight, flung the handful in the general direction of Dillon. Instinctively the man halted and threw up a hand, shoulders hunching. The next instant all his energy and attention had switched to a violent leap calculated to put him clear of flailing, formidable hoofs. Stung by one of the scattering pebbles, Silverdust had uttered a shrill neigh and again went high in the air.

"That damned horse!" roared Stanley. In a fresh gust of hate he flipped the bore of his gun around to the stallion.

But inevitably the uproar had diverted the remaining posseman's attention. His glance flicked to take it in, and Toby's right fist flashed. With a snap like the cracking of a tree limb the man's chin went up and he stretched to full length. He fell that way, striking head and shoulders upon Stanley, jarring him from his tracks even as he drew bead upon the horse.

Stanley fired, but the bullet whizzed past Silverdust's ear. The stallion snorted his terror and whirled. A second bullet sent him stampeding down canyon. Before Stanley could shoot again, Toby was upon him.

Carol scrambling to her feet, recognized the hopelessness of the ensuing struggle. Injured, Toby had no chance of besting Stanley, even had there been no interference to be expected. And already the tramp of running feet an angry cry, announced the return of the posseman sent to fetch the horses.

Yet, like Toby, it was bred in her to fight on, even in the face of certain defeat. And Dillon seemed her own particular adversary. He was closest, too. With a curious disregard of all that went on he was pursuing the job Stanley had been unable to finish—the destruction of the silver stallion.

Carol didn't throw a handful of gravel this time. She picked up a rock the size of a man's fist, hurled it with all her strength. She missed his head. It passed in front of his face, scraping his chin and taking along two inches of hide.

He howled, jerking backward. His shot went into the air. He slapped a hand to his face, swore when it came away red. A second rock in her hand, Carol froze as he whirled upon her, eyes snake-like with hate. "You throw that," he snarled, and I'll blow off your damned head!"

Again Carol knew he meant it. Dimly she was aware of a sudden silence in which the trickle of the creek made a thin sort of music. Toby's battle had ended. He had been. . . . "Do as he says, Carol!" His voice, frantic with warning, brought a flicker of relief. He had been overpowered, not killed. That meant he'd be standing with a gun, maybe two, digging into him.

Slowly Carol opened her hand, let the rock fall. Dillon holstered his gun. Silently, deliberately, he strode towards her. A new kind of terror swept the girl. Involuntarily she retreated a step, then another. Her lungs swelled. She gathered her muscles to whirl and run.

But he was too quick for her. He lunged. His hand closed on her arm and he gave a jerk that brought her to her knees. She landed hard on a jagged stone. Pain sent a wave of faintness through her, blotting out his face. Through it she was aware of a commotion, of Toby's voice raging in protest. When it faded she heard Stanley say in a tone of cruel amusement.

"Let him go ahead. She's got a lesson coming."

Then an open-handed blow rocked her head. Another seemed to split open the side of her face. Between the spaced slaps Dillon muttered blackly, "Do me outa 200 bucks bounty, will you? You—" A third ringing slap drowned out the epithet.

A hollow droning filled Carol's ears. Dillon's opened hand swelled to gigantic proportions as again it started towards her. She heard a fourth sharp crack, yet felt no impact. Incredibly she saw a hole appear in the middle of his palm, a small, round spot that spilled crimson.

"Get back, hombre, or the next one'll be right through your head!" said a voice grimly.

Wildly Carol turned. From down canyon had appeared a new party—a dark, lanky man with a star on his chest, two others unbelievably familiar, and a tall elderly cattleman with eyes of grey fury and a gun in his hand.

"Dad!" Carol thought she screamed, but only a faint sound came from her throat.

Something happened behind her at that. Carol knew by the break in her father's stride.

The air came alive then to the crash of gunfire. Carol tried to turn and see but her father held her down. The bark of his gun sounded louder than the rest. She heard the whine of lead glancing from rocks, shouts, a choking cry. As abruptly as it had begun, it ended.

Carol found herself in Jim Trevis's arms, sobbing. "Did you—did you *fly* to get here?"

Surprisingly, he answered in the affirmative. "That's it, honey. We got your wire yesterday afternoon. We knew it'd have to be mighty serious to make you send for me, knowing how busy we were. Bill thought of a plane, looked it up and found there was an airport as close as Carson City. We found out about this shortcut to Sagetown, and took it."

He would have gone on, but by this time Carol had pulled herself together. "Toby!"

She saw him the minute she turned, stretched out on the ground motionless. Terror gripping her heart, she ran to him.

Uncle Charlie came up with a hatful of water as she dropped to her knees. "He's all right, Carol," he offered reassuringly. "Take more than two slugs to finish this fightin' young hellion. The way he dropped away from the gun stuck in his ribs and sailed into the jasper holdin' it. Stanley's deader 'n a doornail now!"

With cold compresses she was endeavoring to staunch the flow of blood from Toby's new wound when he opened his eyes. "Everything—all right?" he whispered.

"You bet!" asserted Sheriff Brimhall, coming up with Carol's father. "Dillon spilled everything."

"Silverdust gave us the chance to fight. That's twice he's saved us, isn't it, Toby?" Carol bent to press her cheek to the cowboy's.

Jim Trevis cleared his throat. "You seem to know this bewhiskered young gent pretty well, honey," he remarked quizzically.

Carol raised her head. "This bewhiskered young gent will be downright handsome once he's shaved," she defended. "And even if he isn't . . ." Her eyes met Toby's. Laughter bubbled in their depths as she lifted them again to meet her father's gaze. "You'd still better be nice to him," she finished, "because he's Toby Lane, and your future son-in-law!"

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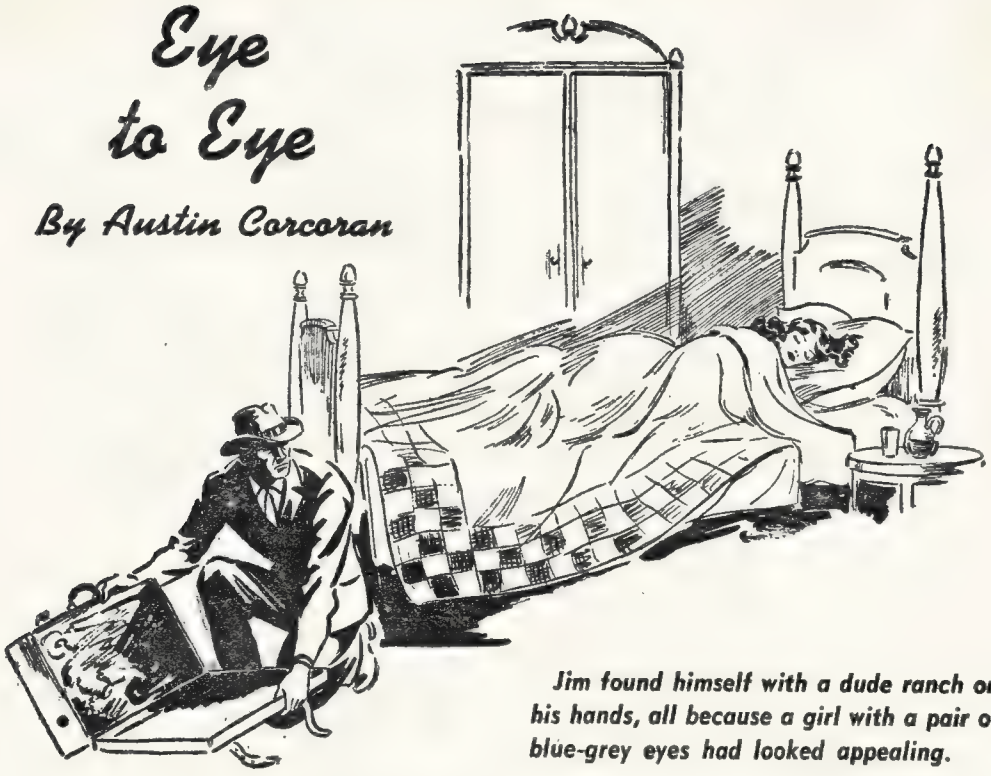
Eye to Eye

By Austin Corcoran



Jim found himself with a dude ranch on his hands, all because a girl with a pair of blue-grey eyes had looked appealing.

OLD SOL poured his rays through the open side of the patio to spread a silky sheen over the pinkish walls of the old ranch house. The range, a lush green after its blanketing of winter's snow, extended in uneven undulations from the low wall surrounding the premises to the rocky feet of the mountains. Hard to find a fairer scene in all the West. But when Jim Morgan left the breakfast table and stepped into the open, he had none of the sensations he had anticipated at standing thus and gazing with justifiable pride over his newly acquired domain.

"I'll be damned if I can see what-for you took on this barracks of a house!" Spike Middleton exclaimed irritably as he ducked in an inch of his tall height to follow through the low doorway.

"What're you beefin' about?" Jim demanded, crispness in his usually amiable voice. "You picked your room, any exposure you wanted. And prob'ly for the first time in your life there's nobody bunked in with you, to grouch about your snoring."

"Yeah—a room you can't find in the dark, in this damn crossword puzzle of a place," Spike continued his grumbling. "I'll take outdoors or a one-room cabin, where I can figger out what noises mean. After we turned in last night I heard a slap and bang way off in the east, though I thought we was alone and you bedded down close to me. I'm just fallin' asleep when there's a whammin' around about a quarter of a mile to the west. This mornin' I headed for the kitchen by my compass—and that catercorner traffic system o' halls landed me at the foot of one of them staircases that leads to the crazy settin' room on the roof."

"You'll get used to it," Jim retorted callously.

To be truthful he had experienced such similar feelings during the night that he had decided to tell Ramón and his wife, Carola, who was to cook for the outfit, that they might occupy one of the many rooms in the ranch house. To his amazement Carola refused his offer with firmness. "No," she replied, "no live in *casa.*"

"Yes," Jim insisted. "It is much nicer than

the small cabin. Fine—*muy grande.*"

She shook her head stubbornly. "Me an' Ramon stay in *cabaña!*"

Exasperated by her unexpected opposition, Jim persisted, arguing and coaxing. At length she burst into a torrent of Spanish, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

"Nonsense!" he exploded, as he sorted out her main words. "The *casa* isn't haunted. There are no spooks here!"

But it appeared some woman in town had advised against Ramón and his wife coming to the ranch, declaring the place held spirits. "*El tejado*—they fight up there." She pointed towards the roof sitting room. "*Vaqueros* who ride hear them *la noche.*"

"That woman only wanted to make you go some place else," Jim declared sharply. "This house has no ghosts. A rich city man built it a few years ago—it isn't old. Nobody ever fought or died here," he concluded, completely out of patience with the blank, obstinate stare she gave him.

He was fuming when he jumped into his car and headed for town for the rock salt he had meant to bring home the previous evening. But Doris Cameron had jumped on him for buying El Feliz Ranch, knocking every sensible idea from his mind. Her reaction had been an unhappy surprise. When the wealthy Easterner, no longer amused by the ranch, had decided to sell for anything that would rid him of the place, Jim had eagerly grabbed what was to him a miracle, for with the big house went some of the best rangeland in that country.

"Why didn't you buy that darling ranch in Tacos Canyon?" Doris had asked reproachfully.

"Because I don't like being pinched in between high walls," Jim had told her.

"And it has the sweetest house," she had wailed. "Then you go and buy that horrible great barn. Nothing would induce *me* to live in such a dreadful—"

"You don't have to," Jim remembered snapping back at her. "It's me who's going to live there!" He had wanted to take Doris by the slender shoulders and shake her, a temptation he had experienced several times in the recent past. She had a domineering streak even if she was darn pretty, with coaxy-looking dark eyes and cute curly lashes. She had gone off with a huffy shake of her shoulders, and Jim had a lonely feeling this morning. For quite awhile thoughts of Doris had been his steady companions. What if she stayed mad? And he had nothing to think about but going back to that damn house full of empty rooms?

Pressing his foot determinedly on the gas pedal, he tried to concentrate on the beauty of the wide valley after the previous night's storm. Probably those disturbing noises had been caused by the wind rattling those clumsy wooden shutters that were attached to the windows. He'd soon fix— Hey! Somebody was off the road in that low stretch ahead. As he came nearer the dark patch became a coupe with a Wyoming license plate. Behind the wheel sat a hatless girl, her yellow-blond hair wind-tossed about a pink-cheeked face Jim instantly decided was a lot more than pretty, it was simply fascinating. A shadow of worry in the grey-blue eyes gave way to a friendly, confiding twinkle as their glances met.

"I drove off into a gosh-awful boggy spot," she confessed, "but it really looked better than the road."

"A trick of this country," Jim observed. "This road mud has a gravel foundation, but a few inches either way there simply is no bottom, under that thin, sundried surface. I think I can pull you out," he assured her, getting down from his own car and standing at the window of the coupe, where he could better enjoy looking at her while he talked. No use being in too much hurry with the extricating of her coupe. She didn't look a bit bossy—nothing square and hard about her chin and jaw. But something in her eyes suggested that she had spunk enough for a girl.

"I guess I got off the main road," she remarked, "back at that crossing. I was trying to get to Tavero—then on to El Monte Guest Ranch."

"Lots of folks get off the trail there," Jim replied, "but it may not be so comforting to discover that El Monte won't open for the season till next week. You're early for that sort of thing."

"O-oh," she murmured doubtfully. "I guess I am. But you see my—my vacation commenced—and I was so tired," she sighed, "that I just started out."

"I guess teaching is awfully tiresome," Jim said, feeling better acquainted with her when it became evident she was a teacher. For this early summer vacation business, added to her plain clothing, summed up to that in Jim's mind.

"It is hard," she agreed. "Makes you want a decided change." Her eyes were wistful and so was the mouth that drooped ever so slightly at the corners. And she had the prettiest eyebrows, a little darker than her hair. Jim wanted to stretch out a hand and follow their silky crescents with a tanned fingertip. Afterwards, so bemused was he, Jim Morgan swore he had no idea of uttering the words he suddenly heard fall from his lips.

"I'm not open for the season, either," he declared. "Just came over to El Feliz Ranch from my other place, to get ready. But maybe we could make you comfortable for a few days—till you make other plans."

SHE gave him an intent look, her red lips again forming the thoughtful "O-o-oh!" which made them so alluring. Damn it but she was a temptation to a lonesome fellow! Jim had a terrific urge to lean through the car window and kiss her. But he restrained the impulse and tried to appear calm while she considered. Presently she said, "All right—I will, over the week-end, anyhow. And thank you. My name is Smith—Miss M-Molly Smith."

Rock salt forgotten for the second time because of a girl, Jim led the way back to the big, pinkish-walled house which appeared to have as many moods as an April day. An hour before it had seemed sad and oppressive. Now it dominated the scene with the dignity and beauty Jim had first attributed to the dwelling.

"It's lovely!" the girl exclaimed in her soft, pleasant voice. And she assured Jim she did not mind waiting in the patio while he talked to his housekeeper about her accommodations.

Carola had learned to speak very little English since she'd come from the far back mountain country to marry Ramón Gonzales. But Jim was able to put over the main idea. *"Sí, sí,"* she assured him she would cook for the girl, peeping out at Molly with interested eyes. Why—putting over the suddenly conceived scheme was a cinch, Jim decided jubilantly.

When Molly had chosen a room, she said, "While Carola is getting it ready for me, I'll run into town and see if I have any mail."

"Got an errand myself," Jim told her hastily. "I'll drive you in." He'd have to ride herd on Molly Smith while she was in Tavero, where she could easily learn that El Feliz ranch was certainly no dude outfit.

She wanted to tank up, so they climbed into the coupe, Molly Smith offering Jim the wheel. It was then he spied Spike Middleton dismount at the corral and, after one look towards the house, start that way with long strides. When the lanky cowpuncher approached the car, Jim said hastily, "Spike, meet Miss Smith. She's going to be with us a few days. I told her we aren't open for the season yet, but she says she doesn't mind putting up with a few inconveniences." His words flowed smoothly despite the queer blank look in Spike's hazel eyes and the almost alarmed way his Adams apple wiggled up and down in the lean throat.

But a glint came quickly to replace the blankness of his eyes and Spike rose to the occasion. "Fine. Glad to meetcha, Miss Smith," he said with a little more warmth than Jim considered necessary.

After a few words, she took a key from her handbag, extending it to Spike with a smile. "I wonder if you'd mind setting out my bags?" she said. "They're in the trunk. The lock sort of sticks and you have to give the lid a sharp jerk. I had it fixed in Pueblo yesterday, but they certainly didn't do a very good job."

"Sure—sure," Spike assented with alacrity. "I'll put your stuff right up in your room, Miss Smith." As he went on around the car the cowpuncher slanted a significant look at Jim, his lowered left eyelid promising cooperation in the conspiracy but also warning that he meant to grab some of the fun for himself.

Molly Smith exclaimed and questioned about the country but offered no further information regarding herself. Jim didn't care what she talked about so long as he could listen to the pleasant cadence of her voice and snatch an occasional peep at the face he found more enchanting with every glance he stole at it.

Too soon they arrived before the post office and he sprang out to open the car door, his gaze following Molly Smith as she vanished into the building. A smile mingling contentment and abstraction lingered on his features until a tart voice aroused him with disconcerting abruptness.

"I thought you were too busy to come to town in the daytime," Doris Cameron said, suddenly appearing at Jim's elbow, suspiciously eyeing the sleek coupe beside him.

BEFORE he could reply, Molly was returning, pink-cheeked and smiling, looking like a spring morning in contrast to the clouded features Doris was displaying. "That's all for me," Molly said, "and you needn't hurry about your errands. I don't mind waiting." There was natural interest in the glance she gave to Doris, but Jim's lips stiffened over the words he was trying to form into the introduction he knew was in order. With her usual capability, Doris took over.

"How do you do?" she said, assuming a cordial smile as her dark eyes flashed over the other girl from the plain black leather sandals over the equally plain, dark blue dress to the natural looking waves of soft yellow-blond hair. "I'm Doris Cameron and pleased to meet any friend of Jim's."

Molly smiled. "My name is Smith," she said, "M-Molly Smith. Mr. Morgan has kindly allowed me to spend the week-end on El Feliz Ranch, even if he hasn't opened for the season."

There was a dizzy and seemingly endless period when Jim felt as if he were plunging into a bottomless void. Then Doris said coolly, "I see. Jim can be very accommodating—when he cares to."

"And it seems to me a real favor—to open a Guest Ranch just for me," Molly returned serenely.

The brown eyes below Doris's thinly penciled brows narrowed and gleamed oddly. "We-ell," she said thoughtfully, "I'm sure he will make you comfortable—and Carola is a wonderful cook. Glad to have met you, Miss—er—Smith. I have to hurry on back to school now, but I'll be seeing you."

The bubble of Jim's jubilance went flat right there. He knew Doris. She'd spread the news all over Tavera before night. Oh, well—Molly Smith was bound to learn the truth if she went on to El Monte, and he could stand the ribbing he was due to get. He'd whisk Molly out of town before anybody else could talk to her and there would still be the possibilities of the week-end.

There were no further unfortunate incidents. Carola had a nice lunch of Spanish dishes waiting for them and Spike didn't succeed in grabbing all the limelight. And Jim took Molly for a ride up Riata Canyon where he was going for some horses. She admitted modestly to having been on a horse a few times and he honestly commended her for taking to the saddle more naturally than most green riders. She was no flirt, but she was darned good company and Jim felt that he had one whale of a swell afternoon. He returned triumphantly to the big house without a qualm of foreboding until they rode around the curve of the wall and he spied a blue sedan close to the patio gate with two feminine figures strolling around the enclosure. Spike stood by with sagging shoulders and a generally cowed air.

Doris greeted them with calm assurance. "I decided that a week-end in the country would do me good," she explained, adding with a glance at Molly Smith, "*my* school hasn't closed yet. And Mrs. Archibald is so bored with hotels," she indicated the plump, elderly woman who hovered nearby, "that I told her I was sure Jim wouldn't mind two more guests for over Sunday."

"B-but—" Jim Morgan stammered.

"She quite understands that you're taking in guests rather unexpectedly," Doris assured him.

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Archibald declared. "My doctor urged this trip into higher altitude—but I see it's too early and—" Her voice drifted away on a gloomy sigh.

"I told her she would see some real ranch life here," Doris went on with unbroken calm, "without a lot of frills. That you have the most unique guest outfit in the country."

"Why-er—" Jim again commenced, halting helplessly. Where the hell was his nerve gone to? And damn Spike anyhow, for hanging around and keeping his boss uncomfortably aware of the derisive thoughts with which that lean cowpuncher's mind was teeming. Was ever a fellow in such a devil of a fix? Well, he wasn't going to let Doris see he was buffaloed. He squared his shoulders. "Come on in, folks," he said, setting booted feet down firmly as he led the way into the house. "I guess supper's ready, and as soon's we eat Carola'll fix you up some rooms."

THERE followed a weird fantasy of scenes, each more nightmarish, Jim thought, than the preceding one. There was sheer torment in the wicked calm with which Doris stressed the dude ranch theme. His sensitized ears caught many a smothered chuckle from the sober-faced Spike. Only in speech with Molly Smith was there any relief from strain. But this never lasted long,

there were too many ways Doris could break in.

"It's such a surprise to his friends—this guest idea," she remarked sweetly as they sat by the big fireplace along in the evening. "I've never known anybody more set against it than Jim used to be. But when he fell, he surely fell hard. And he's been successful—no trouble at all to find plenty of patronage."

Jim suppressed a groan. Domineering was a mild description for Doris Cameron's nature. She was as interfering as the devil and cold-blooded as hell. Could stick a knife in a fellow, twist it and watch him squirm without blinking one of those curly lashes that made her look so sweet and little-girly—when you didn't know her very well.

At the end of endurance, he suggested they head for bed, since all of them had put in a rather tiring day.

"Yes, I'd like the house quiet," Mrs. Archibald sighed. "I took my tonic an hour ago and now it's time for my nerve pill. After that I should sleep undisturbed."

"I shall," Molly remarked softly, the grey-blue eyes holding Jim's gaze just long enough to give him a fluttery feeling in his chest. "I won't do another bit of unpacking, just get into bed and dream of this wonderful, wonderful country."

Doris hung back for a final word with the unwilling Jim. And her attack was direct. "That girl is not a school teacher," she declared. "Vacations haven't started in Wyoming yet. And look at her clothes!"

"Very plain," Jim murmured.

"The kind of plain that cost more dollars than any schoolma'am earns," Doris retorted. "A Packard de luxe coupe to drive. And Smith's not her name. Did you notice how she stammered when she gave it to me?" Doris made a face as she mimiced the other girl's soft voice, " 'My name is Smith—M-Molly Smith.' No telling what her game is!' "

"I don't think it matters," Jim replied stiffly, suppressing the hot wave of anger that surged through him. "I'm the one who put up a game—which you're playing even harder to put over."

"Of course," Doris said hastily, her eyes going soft as she looked up at him. "You know you can always count on me to help you, Jimmy—and you do need somebody with a practical mind."

"In other words, she thinks I need a boss," he thought irritably as he went to his room.

There was no storm to bang the shutters that night and Jim Morgan soon fell into a heavy sleep, from which he aroused slowly even when piercing shrieks went echoing through the halls and the many rooms of the ranch house. He rolled over slowly, then his feet hit the floor sharply as he heard a stentorian shout from the direction of Spike's room.

"Coming! Coming!" the powerful voice dominated the still erupting screams. A loud, firm, "Jim! Jim-mee-ee-ee!" from Doris added to the tumult.

DRAGGING on his pants as he ran, Jim burst into the hallway, straining to decide from which direction the shrill, terrified yells were coming. It was Mrs. Archibald. That was her nasal tone and her room opened from—let's see—the second passageway. Jim plunged around a corner, aware that Spike was ahead of him when he nearly trod on a receding heel. Around another turn and lamplight came from an open doorway that framed Doris in a maroon robe that revealed tailored pajamas of the same color. She joined him. They rushed on, almost bumping into Molly Smith who had arrived outside Mrs. Archibald's door, small flashlight in hand.

"We're coming," she called clearly.

Then Jim thrust the door inward and they were in the room, the circle of light from the tube in Molly's hand revealed the plump lady sitting stiffly erect in bed, her mouth still open from her last shriek. She extended shaking hands, her heavily cold-creamed features crumpling as if she were going to cry.

"Oh—oh!" she moaned. "I thought he was going to kill me. I woke up and I felt his breath on my very face. His hands were on my shoulders and— Oh—o-o!"

"Take it easy, Mrs. Archibald," Jim said soothingly. "You just had a nightmare—that's all."

"Sure—sure," Spike backed him up promptly. "I had a bunch of 'em my first night here—I mean this year."

"It was not a nightmare!" the plump lady insisted indignantly. "I tell you there was a man in here—and he was going to rob me and *kill* me!"

"He'd have done that before you'd a chance to yell," Doris said calmly. "But he might have robbed you."

A search of Mrs. Archibald's effects dis-

covered nothing missing. But she continued to quiver and sigh, and several minutes of soothing talk were required before she'd permit the group to retire.

"There happens to be a bolt on this door," Jim told her. "You shoot that to place and you'll be safe as a church. Spike and I'll search the house, too, and if there was a burglar we'll grab him."

"Grab nothing in this damn puzzle house!" Spike muttered. "While we'd chase two ways, he'd be laughin' at us from a third or fourth or fifth runway."

"I'm sure she was dreaming after all that medicine," Molly said, suppressing a giggle. She had wound herself up in some kind of a silky robe from beneath which was visible about an inch of sheer white material that kept Jim slanting the flashlight that way, the white stuff had such a pretty, feminine look. He was glad the Tavero Electric Light Company had promised to have his line hooked up the following day. He could sure use some of their illumination. And Molly's hair looked awfully soft shaken down around her shoulders, while there was still a sleepy expression in her eyes that seemed more blue than grey when they met his in the glimmering light of a lamp hastily kindled by Spike.

"Sorry about the ruckus," Jim apologized, "but it's nothing to worry about, girls."

"I shan't," Molly replied, smothering a yawn which gave her mouth the fascinating "oh" shape.

"But you'd better shove that chest of drawers in front of your door," Doris advised coolly. "For there was somebody in the house. He was in my room first."

"What!" Jim exploded. "Who was he—what'd he look like?"

"I don't know," she replied with a shrug. "When Mrs. A. yelled, I aroused with sort of a feeling I'd been disturbed before. Then I lighted the lamp and saw my suitcase had been dragged out of the closet and opened."

It seemed incredible. Jim Morgan had never heard of a burglary in the country around Tavero. But he knew Doris was telling the truth. And when he recalled that Spike had not preceded him, but arrived later at the Archibald doorway, he decided that he had almost run into the fleeing invader.

"There's a dozen windows and doors he could get out of," Spike said. "You can bet he's far away by this time."

They went into Doris's room and took a look at the suitcase which had been left open in front of the closet door. "And look here!" she exclaimed, pointing to her pillow. "There are dirty fingermarks on each side. He stood here giving me the once-over, too!"

Jim shook his head in speechless puzzlement.

"He must have been looking for somebody in particular," Doris suggested, her gaze resting thoughtfully on Molly Smith.

"Nonsense!" Jim growled. That was carrying her mad too far—hinting that a burglar would be prowling around on a hunt for Molly.

"It's just an exciting mystery," she said. "Let's not try to solve it."

"That's the idea," Jim assented with relief. "You girls barricade yourselves in and leave Spike and me to take a look through the house. If we find a clue, we'll tell you in the morning."

WHEN they returned to the kitchen after a fruitless search, Spike dropped into a chair with a sigh. "It'll take all summer to get this house learnt. And I wish to hell, if you had to buy the place, that city bird had seen fit to keep his furnishings. If you hadn't had all this stuff, you couldn't have got into this mess—and *I* might've got some sleep tonight."

"Mess?" Jim repeated, elevating a scornful eyebrow.

"That's what it sure is," Spike maintained stoutly. "I could've stopped Doris bein' so mad at you, if you'd of let me help with Molly Smith—like I tried to. But you've gotta try to hang onto 'em both."

"That's a flat lie," Jim declared, "I sure don't want 'em both!"

"Well, you want the guest girl," Spike retorted, "and you've *got* Doris. Which amounts to the same thing in the end. I'm goin' to bed. G'night!"

The next morning was such a perfect early June day that even Mrs. Archibald graciously consented to shake off the memory of her previous night's scare. "Not that it was a dream," she insisted stubbornly.

Ramón loved to show off on a bucking horse and Jim permitted him a half-hour of showmanship. "He's good—graceful and picturesque," Molly told Jim. "He doesn't need a salty bucker to give a good show."

Jim shot her a quick glance. Even Doris hadn't caught on that most of the horse's activity was stimulated by his rider. There

had been several items adding up a list in Jim's mind to make him suspect Miss Molly Smith wasn't unused to ranch life. She rode too well, caught on to everything with too ready facility, for the chance knowledge she claimed. But no matter where she came from, nor what she knew, Jim was for her. Nobody could convince him she would ever be guilty of anything but some harmless pretense. Her personal life was strictly her own business and he wouldn't pry into it.

After the show Jim set Ramón to aiding his wife in a general house-cleaning while the electricians tested wires and worked to get the light system in running order. The old house bustled with activity all day long. Mrs. Archibald took only a short ride, preferring to wander about the first floor of the house, stair climbing being too active for her, but nothing restraining her tongue which continually questioned Ramón or Carola about ranch life.

"The housekeeper says El Feliz ranch house is haunted," Mrs. Archibald remarked at supper.

When Jim laughed this off, stating that the house was too newly built to have ghost-making history, she sighed and glanced over her shoulder. "But I do feel sort of queer," she shivered, "now that it's getting dark again."

"We'll keep every room lighted," Jim laughed. From his seat at the table he could look from the dining room along the passageway to Molly Smith's door, and he thought with a surprisingly sharp pang that after one more night, she would no longer be sleeping there. She might be far from the shelter of his roof, perhaps completely gone from his life.

It was fully dark when they settled themselves for a second evening around the fireplace in the first floor sitting room. Doris had taken charge of the scene and presently said calmly that she would stay over until Monday morning, she could easily get to her school in time. Mrs. Archibald had left her chair with the remark that she felt able to knit a little, and after a glance at the lighted hallways, set out for her room. Jim was trying to maneuver Spike from his chair beside Molly when everybody sprang to their feet as if moved by an electric current.

"Help! Get him!" Mrs. Archibald was screaming. "He's got Molly's suitcase! Hurry!"

THEY boiled into the nearest hall, Spike's long legs tangling with themselves and tripping him, while Jim sprang past. Molly's door was open and Mrs. Archibald stood on the threshold of her room, pointing with a stiff arm towards the south end of the house. Now Jim could hear racing steps in front of him, and the lights snapped off at that end of the house. He was charging through darkness towards the first staircase to the roof living room. The retreating feet raced up those steps, Jim after them, fingers fumbling vainly for the light switch as he launched himself upward. He heard his quarry stumble and flounder about in the big room, and pounded on with redoubled speed. Spike was yelling in the rear and still farther back came a weird wailing in Carola's voice.

"There's going to be a fight on the roof now," he thought grimly, "but not by spooks." Then he was close to a panting figure that ran clumsily. The end of a suitcase was swung back to whack Jim against the knees. Jim pitched forward, grabbing fiercely as he went down, his hands closing about an ankle. He clutched so grimly that regaining balance was impossible. The quarry appeared to be pitching off into space. There was no saving himself, and Jim was being dragged on behind him. They were plunging down the far staircase from the roof room, the suitcase pounding along with them. They landed in a dark chaos, arms and legs flailing and the unseen thief groaning curses.

When the blaze of light came on, Jim was still clutching the ankle of a well dressed fellow who eyed him balefully from below a thick brush of blond hair. The open suitcase lay beside them and they were surrounded by stacks of crisp new twenty and hundred dollar bills.

"You carry a lot of money for a schoolma'am," Doris remarked with a cold stare at Molly Smith.

She was gazing dazedly at the banknotes. "But they weren't in *my* suitcase," she said.

"That's a lie," Doris contradicted with an air of pleasantly doing her duty. "I saw it in your closet when I came into your room last night."

"Yes—but it isn't mine. I thought it belonged in the house." Molly said.

"I carried it in from your car," Spike contributed honestly, though with a troubled expression on his wedge-shaped features.

There was a babble of talk during which Jim

held on to the ankle, his prisoner maintained venomous silence, and the mystery merely increased. Finally Molly Smith said, "I remember that man. He was in the Pueblo garage where they repaired the lock of my car trunk, yesterday afternoon. He acted sort of nervous. Maybe he put the suitcase in my car then. He could have been afraid his car would be inspected when he crossed the State Line. And I'm sure he heard me say I was coming on to Tavero."

"So he took a chance on getting back his cash. Stolen, probably," Jim said. "Speak up!" he gave the ankle and leg a vicious twist.

Pain twisted the pale features of the prisoner. "I admit nothing," he spat.

"All the same to me," Jim assured him, getting up and jerking the fellow to his feet. "You can thresh it out with the sheriff. I'm turning you in for housebreaking and theft. Whoever owns the suitcase, you were sneaking it out of my house."

Doris had been examining a packet of the banknotes. "I'm sure they're counterfeit," she declared. "And you know a great deal of that stuff has been distributed lately." Her eyes, cold and suspicious rested on Molly. "It all seems very queer," she concluded.

"Not to me!" Jim burst out. "This bird was hid in the house all day, with no chance to get the money. Last night he was trying to find which room Molly Smith was in."

Molly's eyes thanked him, then sparkled with surprising spunk when Doris said, "What is your real name?"

"Smith," was the cool reply, "Marian Lucille Smith. Molly to my friends."

Suddenly Jim recalled items in newspapers, lists of prominent names. "And your father is Hi Smith of the Double Triangle," he said.

She nodded.

"My soul—the cattle king!" Spike breathed.

Doris shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. "I knew you weren't a teacher," she said, "but being a plain, open and aboveboard person myself, I didn't try to figure you out. Well, Jim—how about giving Spike a gun and sending him to town with your prisoner and the mysterious money? And perhaps Miss—er Marian Lucille Smith should go along—just to explain to the sheriff, you know."

"I'm phoning him to come out here," Jim replied, his nice voice almost a growl.

"Don't mind her," Molly whispered to Jim as they went back to the sitting room. "She's an organizer and just can't help it. Let her be what she wants to be—like I enjoy being just Molly Smith."

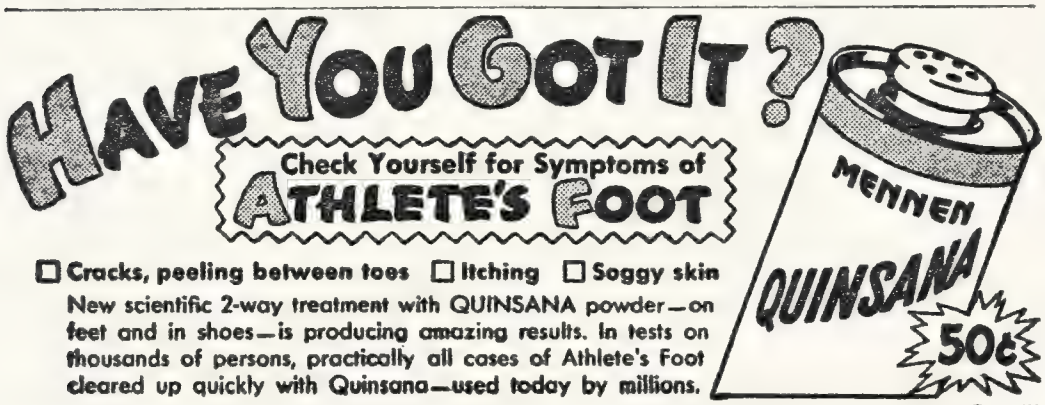
Not until the sheriff had come and gone did Jim have the opportunity to follow up that statement. Then he remarked that he had a certain matter to discuss with Miss Smith and calmly led her into the kitchen, now deserted by the still superstitiously apprehensive Carola. "I'm sorry about your dad being Hi Smith," he told her bluntly.

She gave him a straight, understanding look. "Don't be," she advised. "Just go up and get acquainted with him. He's pretty swell—and Dad and I always see eye to eye."

"Just look at all the mixup," Spike grumbled later when he and Jim had said good night to the ladies and were on their way to bed. "And I'll bet you haven't the least idee how you stand now. No telling what's ahead."

"Oh, yes there is," Jim grinned. "I haven't 'got' Doris as you stated. She's positively on her own. As for Molly Smith—well, that's telling a little too much."

"Humph!" Spike ejaculated. "Y'needn't tell nothin'—not with the big grin that's on your face now."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NORTH OF THE BORDER

By J. Paul Loomis

When a Mountie's on a man-chase to the death what he needs most is a good horse under him . . . but a Mountie, like any other man, needs to know there's a girl waiting home for him, too.

THE day it was reported that Holt, deputy minister of the Indian Department, had been robbed of the treaty money for the Crees on Running Bear's reserve, Major Bonnet, chief veterinary officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was buying remounts some 50 miles south of there. He expected orders by telegraph that he and his companion, Corporal William Dann, should join in the search for the three holdup men. No wire came. So they went on with the matter in hand.

Major Bonnet knew the Canadian plains as he knew his own pockets—from the Qu-Appelle to the Foothills, from the Border to the bush. And he knew horses. He went now to the Broken Spur Ranch. For Campbell McKay's many years of using only thoroughbred stallions—*and* those sweeping sweet-grass ranges in the Cypress Hills—had produced a herd of flint-hoofed, deep-lunged and fire-hearted horses that are a cavalryman's dream realized.

By Mounted Police order of long standing the veterinary officer must see each horse ridden before purchase. Major Bonnet was doing that now, short black pipe between his lips and his crow-tracked eyes carelessly intent as he sat on the top rail of the corral. Silvery-mustached Campbell McKay made brackets of his long legs beside him and by a jerk of his thumb relayed to his wranglers the veterinary officer's decision. Ad Faegly and Ron Stillwell were doing the riding. Corporal William Dann was just looking on. His turn would come when the horses purchased had to be trailed 40 miles to the remount depot at Regina. And trained.

They were big four-year-olds. They'd never known a head-stall nor even a rope except on that day of fright and pain when, as yearlings, they'd been gelded and branded. They were saddled and mounted in a chute, and when they came out of it they put a lot of dusty daylight under them. Few tricks. No viciousness. Just a strong-hearted, whalebone colt's determination to get his freedom back.

Stillwell rode with a loose-limbed balance and a grin on his snub-nosed face, and he was seldom thrown. Ad Faegly rode with vise-like legs, a set jaw below his long straight nose and black-browed eyes, and a hard hand on the hackamore. He wasn't thrown at all.

Corporal Dann's musing eyes re-pictured a day before he'd joined The Force, when he'd beaten Stillwell but lost to Faegly at the Calgary Stampede. A week later one of the saddlers, on a binge, had confided to Bill Dann that he'd been paid a hundred bucks to slip a hypodermic "dead-head" into the horse Bow River Dann drew in the finals. Late to claim a re-ride then.

But Corporal Dann's polished and jack-spurred heels were hooked comfortably on the second corral rail now and from beneath the stiff brim of his tilted Stetson, for which two years ago he'd exchanged the old soft-brim sort, his blue-grey eyes were on the horses. No horse-trainer could ask for better stuff, so the eyes were anticipatingly warm. But sometimes they lost focus, gazing off in another direction from broncs and stampede arenas. Bronze-haired, amber-eyed Moira McKay, bright as a russet autumn leaf in the early sunshine, had been just ready to go somewhere that morning as Major Bonnet and Bill Dann rode up to the dusty ranch-yard.

Introductions. Bill was always flat-footed in the presence of formality. With a laugh for the major's bantering gallantry and a shake of those curls whose the copper threads snared the sunlight, she'd swung to the saddle

of a creamy-maned little palomino Ad Faegly had brought from the stable. He'd walked beside her horse to the front gate and opened it for her. Then handed her something which at first she'd protested taking, then accepted with a gay smile. Faegly had walked halfway back to the stable before he'd remembered to replace his hat on his smoothly combed black head. Of course it was none of Bill's business. But Bill knew Ad Faegly, though little good of him. Seeing Moira with him waked something inside Bill to cord muscles and knot fists.

"Yip-p-e-e!" yelled Ron Stillwell and embroidered his ride on a big brown by fanning the horse with his hat. But this ride Bill didn't see at all. For Moira loped up behind them, and in what looked like one little movement she had vaulted out of her saddle and was up the fence. There she was beside McKay and almost touching Bill, of which he was acutely aware. But for all she seemed to notice him the square-shouldered young Mountie wasn't there at all.

"Dad!" she exclaimed. "You aren't selling Red Lance!"

The tall, weathered ranchman set himself for the effort of opposing her. "He's too much horse for you, young lady," he declared. "And always will be. I can see it in his eyes and I know what a wild witch his mother was. Besides, he's so big you'd have to pack a step-ladder to get on him. He's in the corral there to go with the rest—if he don't queer himself with Major Bonnet when he gets the leather on. That's so *you* won't ever give him a chance to break your silly neck."

Sideways he looked at that slim neck fondly. Bill Dann was looking at the back of it and at the coppery curls above it and at the trim, silk-covered shoulders and willowy waist below. If he thought of horses at all now it was of a thoroughbred filly, its blood set a-snapping by the first morning of autumn frost.

But he followed the girl's gaze into the corral of unbroken horses and he didn't need to ask which one they were talking about. A bay, you'd have to call him—but actually Indian-Red in color—shining in the sun like a wet seal, with long mane and tail of jet. Small ears . . . large wide-set eyes . . . big, thin nostrils . . . chest like a kettle-drum . . . short powerful back . . . haunches with the drive of a locomotive . . . legs long, clean, all springs. That was the way Bill's head

clicked it off. A man's horse if there ever was one. And this bow-string of a girl wanted him!

The last minute Bill Dann had been ready to start, had Moira asked him, to fetch her the world with a ribbon around it. Now he resented her insistence on just one horse. Not *his* horse either, though there'd lately been a time when he'd have walked to Mexico to get such a horse for his own. Now he wanted it for The Force. His only to make into a horse that would obey perfectly, that would face danger, that would carry some resolute rider, on duty, to the end of the toughest trail. For the spirit of the Royal Mounted had got under the skin of the one-time bronc-peeler, Bow River Dann. To help keep it the best mounted police force in the world was bigger to him now than any personal thing.

INTO the midst of this half-recognized feeling the lovely Moira thrust herself, turning to him and gripping his arm beneath the golden chevrons on his scarlet sleeve.

"Corporal Dann! Don't you think Red Lance can be trained?"

"I centainly do," Bill replied huskily. He couldn't lie about that horse and certainly he couldn't lie to those big violet eyes. "But—but—" he floundered unhappily.

"Hear that, Dad! Corporal Dann says Red Lance isn't an outlaw? Why won't you have him gentled for me?"

It put McKay on the spot. Of course his sun rose and set by this vibrant daughter! But horses were man's business. Bonnet and Dann he respected as being horsemen from their boot-heels up. It would be humiliating if they thought him soft, to be twiddled around by a girl.

"I said no and I mean it." To the men in the corral he called, "Put the red-bay into the chute."

Moira flung down from the fence, the color suddenly drawn into a bright spear-head in each cheek. She went to the chute where Red Lance was lunging and striking, throwing his head at the hackamore, keeping the men busy fishing under him for the saddle cinch. She tried to stroke his neck, she appeared to catch at the saddle to keep it from slipping back as he reared.

Her father thundered at her. Bill Dann, knowing too well the danger of a broken arm —or a crushed one should the frantic horse whip 'round with his teeth—was coming on the run. Ad Faegly pushed Moira back so quickly she would have fallen but for Bill's arms.

Bill reached for Faegly but Moira caught his hand with startling strength. That made him remember Ad's gift and Moira's smile as she rode away that morning, and his arm that still held her dropped to his side. Faegly, with one ugly look at Bill, turned again to the chute and his back gave an insulting shrug. He caught the cinch, slipped its rings onto the hook of the tackabury buckle, heaved twice on the latigo and climbed the chute.

It was Stillwell's turn to ride but the good-natured Ron didn't object. But Bill Dann's teeth gritted at the gloating in Faegly's eyes as he lowered himself into the leather. So Ad wanted the horse too! He'd make an outlaw of him. At the rodeos there was big money to be made, in bets and prizes, with a horse no one could ride.

The bay squatted and Moira and Bill could see him quiver from forelock to tail. Faegly tightened his hat with a yank at its wide brim.

"Let the devil out," he said from the side of his drawn mouth. Moira turned to rush away, and Bill glimpsed the twisting of her lips and the glistening of her eyes. Then she whipped back and climbed swiftly to the top of the fence.

The chute swung wide. Red Lance hurled himself out into the corral. High and hard he bucked and lightning-fast, his twelve hundred pounds of sinew and fear and fight hitting the ground with tearing jolts. He sunfished. He swapped ends. He whipped from side to side like a snake with its head pinned down.

FAEGLY stayed in the saddle. Now his head was against the black mane. Now it was snapped back like a whiplash. He was tough as a boot, but his nose bled from the jarring. Yet no daylight showed under his legs. If his heels lost their grip they quickly re-gained it. That too knotted Bill's jaw. You could hold that way only with locked rowels. Bill knew how they cut, what they'd do if they crossed the spur-vein just under the hide in a horse's flank.

Then a terrific side-jump cost Faegly a stirrup. He got it again, but Bill read in the twitch that broke the set of the rider's features that this time even Faegly had climbed onto more horse than he bargained for.

Suddenly both man and horse were in the dust.

It looked like desperate viciousness on the part of Red Lance. Bill heard the anguished "Oh!" it wrung from Moira. For Faegly, of course! So he whipped only a glance at her white face as he jumped from the fence. His blood was pounding as he ran across the corral. Only practiced eyes like his could spot how Faegly had thrown his weight into the left stirrup and at the same time yanked the horse's head to the left.

He'd flipped himself clear, too. But Red Lance had rolled over with the fall and his feet had gone between the lower rails of the corral. Now he threw up his head and lurched his powerful body frantically. He couldn't get up. Blood and hair were already on the knotty corral poles and with his wild kicking the horse stood a good chance to break a leg. Bill set his knees on the bay neck and gripped the black muzzle, twisting it upward. Red Lance could no longer even attempt to rise and in a moment his kicking stopped.

Stillwell uncinched the saddle. He and McKay worked the bay's legs out of the fence. At the right moment Bill sprang up, letting the horse's neck straighten, and gave the men a hand. They rolled the horse over, away from the fence. He lurched to his feet, shook dust over them and limped around Ron who'd taken the hackamore rope. Faegly picked up his saddle. Bill stooped quickly as something bright dropped to the dust.

Bill Dan moved deliberately, in a cold, flinty anger. He took off his hat, slipped the lanyard of his revolver over his head, unbuckled his belt, shucked out of his tunic. He hung jacket and gun on the fence and walked close to Faegly. His voice was low with an undercurrent of steel.

"Take off that gun, Ad. Notice I've stepped out of mine—and, for the next ten minutes—out of The Force." He pointed to Faegly's heels. "There are thongs tied in your spur rowels to lock 'em. See how they cut the bay's flanks. You threw him. To make him look mean. But first, and dirtiest, to make him fight his hardest you put *that* under his saddle!"

BILL extended his open hand. Something gleamed metallically yellow in it. A gold ring with a lumpy set. Faegly stared. Moira, who was near, made an inarticulate sound. Bill went on talking:

"You figured to ruin him so's you could buy him yourself and take him around to the stampedes as an outlaw. Ruin a horse like that! Now," Bill stated, "I'll give you the licking of your life."

Faegly hadn't removed his gun. The surprise on his dark face had submerged in hate. He took a step back, maybe in retreat from Bill, maybe the better to command the group. Bill had tossed the ring aside without even looking at it more than to see it was smeared by drying blood. Ad's gun came out. Bill took another determined step.

Then Moira was between them, clutching at the hands of each. "Stop!" she cried. "I did it. I—I—"

Every man in the group stared at her, Bill the hardest. First he thought she was lying, to excuse Faegly. She seemed to read that in the back of his eyes and she threw up her head, blinking fast. Bill saw the tension that thinned her generous lips above her finely moulded chin, how tiny dents came and went above her sensitive nostrils. When she spoke the vibration in her voice implored—no commanded—him to believe.

"You know I didn't want Red Lance sold. But *can* you know how much I wanted him? I slipped the ring under the saddle when I ran to the chute. I—I didn't think it might ruin him." She sent a swift look to Faegly. "I know Ad, it's the ring you gave me. But I had nothing else that would do."

Bill did believe her. Horseman to the core though he was, he felt he might even forgive her. And not just because she was a girl, and beautiful. He opened his lips. But like one man the group whirled.

"Nice little play, folks," came a hard, mocking voice. "Sorry to interupt. In fact, you can go on with it if you don't mind doin' it with hoisted hands. But git 'em up! And be quick about it!"

Two men, six-shooters leveled, were on top of the fence. Handkerchiefs were across their faces. Behind them were two horses with hanging heads and heaving sides.

So engrossed had Bill Dann been with horses he had forgotten the treaty money robbery. Now he knew instantly that these were the bandits. They'd been smoked out of some hide-out to the north and were headed for the International Line. And the badlands beyond. Rigid outwardly, Bill writhed within as he looked at his gun on the fence. Major

Bonnet and Ad Faegly were the only armed men in the group of five.

The major made a game play, leaping to one side like a cat as he drew. He fired, but convulsively, as a bullet crashed through his shoulder. Faegly, though with gun already out, made no such rash attempt. He tossed the gun toward the bandits and raised his hands. The hard line of Bill's lips curled slightly, then straightened and thinned as he noted that something more than scorn blazed in the eyes of the men on the fence.

ONE at a time the men came down. They picked up the two guns and deftly searched McKay, Stillwell and Bill Dann for weapons out of sight. The tall, stooped bandit, whose eyes above the handkerchief were bleached and veined, backed the group against the side of the corral. The stocky, big-eared one led in their dust-caked, stove-up horses and stripped the saddle off. Bill noted the saddlebags, that they were bulky. Indians, simple in their arithmetic, insisted on taking their annuity in one-dollar bills.

"Just a swap." The tall man laughed mirthlessly, with a fraction of a nod toward the horses. "Idaho," he told his partner, "better snare yourself that leggy sorrel. This big red-bay suits me."

"Okay, Hank," Idaho answered. Bill knew that wouldn't be the names of either of them. Idaho was handy with his rope, with a blindfold, with the saddles. He opened the gate, led both horses, quiet under the blindfolds, out of the corral. Hank backed after them, his bleached eyes and his black gun never relaxing their vigilance.

"Red Lance!"

Bill winced at the half whispered cry that broke from Moira, beside him. He saw also the drained cheeks and locked mouth of Bonnet, his friend and admired officer. He saw the leer in the black eyes of Ad Faegly. His blood boiled.

The bandits hadn't bothered to close the gate of the corral. It was Moira who leaped first, but Bill Dann was with her, to stampede the rest of the wild young horses through it. Bill plunged on behind them toward the men who were mounting their untrained horses.

Idaho was in his saddle. His horse smelled the fright of the others, heard their rushing hoofs around him. He bucked again the instant his blindfold was jerked off. Idaho saw Bill in the cloud of dust behind the horses and managed to shoot twice. Clean misses.

What with the horses racing past and the fact that Red Lance was whirling, even with the blindfold, the man called Hank didn't see Bill. Not till he, Hank, was up and throwing a leg across his saddle. It was a high leap to be called a flying tackle but that was the way Bill got him. He wrenched him to the ground. He kept his grip around Hank like a vise, particularly the bandit's gun arm, whose hand was pawing desperately. McKay and Stillwell were on hand by then, with Faegly a little behind them. McKay grabbed Hank's gun.

IDAHO had his horse under control now. He swung back to the aid of his pard. Again his gun barked. Ron Stillwell turned half 'round, coughed, sagged to the ground. The gun in McKay's hand roared vengefully. Idaho pitched from his saddle. He stayed where he fell, face downward in the dust.

It was Hank's voice that broke out when, flat and metallic with hate. He spit his words at Ad Faegly.

"You don't get by with it, damn you! You're a yellow-bellied cur. You threw your gun away an' even when I slipped it back to you, an' we get in a jam, you don't help us." He twisted toward Bill Dann. His breath was hot in Bill's face as he cried, "*He* was in on it. You—Mountie—listen!"

"Right," snapped Major Bonnet, his jaw muscles rigid from pain. "Bill, never throw anything away till you've looked at it. The ring—the one he gave the girl—I picked it up. It's an oddly cut cameo. My friend Holt, of the Indian Department, always wore it."

Cornered from two sides, Ad whipped out a gun. He had the drop on McKay.

"Throw it down, Mac," Ad warned gratingly. "I don't want to kill you, but I will sure as hell if—" He lurched backward. For Bill Dann had thrown Hank, whom he was holding, against Ad Faegly with tremendous force.

Faegly spun to keep from falling. He bumped into Moira. The girl, desperate to do something when so much that was vital to her was happening around her, and acting more from horsewoman's instinct than conscious thought, had caught the dragging reins of the sorrel from which Idaho had fallen. It was one of those fateful things, totally without

plan, that occurs in times of swift action and instantly veers its course.

Faegly grabbed the reins, leaped into the saddle. Then, with his sinewy strength multiplied by desperation, he leaned and caught Moira beneath the shoulders. Even as his horse leaped he hoisted her up in front of him. He yelled and struck his spurs. The sorrel was off like a tawny arrow in pursuit of the running horse herd.

Bonnet, McKay and Bill Dann stood as if they'd been whipped with a club across the head. The gun in McKay's hand might as well have been a club. To keep them from shooting—that was why Faegly had seized Moira. Then through Bill's helplessness struck a sound that was like a trumpet call. The strong whinny of Red Lance.

As if Fate meant to balance the odds, she had done another thing. The red-bay, who'd been released when Bill hauled Hank from the saddle in front of the open corral gate, had been headed *toward* that gate. He'd leaped forward because, through the corral, he could see his mates swinging around it in their race toward freedom. So Red Lance was still in the corral.

There was Moira's dependable little palomino too, where she's left him half an hour ago. But Bill gave only a glancing thought to *his* stocky legs.

"Here," he yelled at McKay, who was running toward the cream-colored pony. "Help me catch the big red!"

The distraught old horse rancher paused long enough for that. The belt and gun of Major Bonnet were hanging from the horn of the saddle on Red Lance. Bill gave them to him. The major, his Colt now in his left hand, could keep Hank prisoner.

THE red-bay hadn't been ridden fairly, as had the sorrel. There'd been the ring under his saddle to torment fear into hate. Nor had he been conquered. Bill knew he'd have to ride as he never had in any arena—with every second of it a waste of priceless time and strength! Of course Faegly might carry Moira only till he was out of pistol range. But—Bill knew that he had read rightly—whenever Ad looked at Moira, there was the gleam of a desperate infatuation in the bronc-rider's eyes.

Bill whipped the blindfold from Red Lance. The dust of the corral was suddenly a long ways underneath Bill. There was a jar of four straight legs hitting the ground with a force to nearly stun a man by driving his own spine into his skull.

Four more such jumps, with Bill fighting to keep between horn and cantle and to bring the bay's head up. It came up at last, and horse with it. Red Lance stood so straight on his hind legs Bill was almost certain he'd go over backward. But Bill was tight along his shoulder, refusing to quit the leather. After what seemed an hour the bay's front hoofs crashed on the ground again. He was facing the gate. For the first time Bill struck his spurs. Red Lance plunged out of the corral. He was still bucking, but running too. And Bill's firm hand was against his neck. Bill's knees were urging him to run. Red Lance saw open ground, saw horses far ahead. He flattened out and ran.

McKay had a hundred yards start but Bill on Red Lance passed him as if the palomino were tied. Faegly was half a mile in the distance. He still had Moira on the sorrel with him. And *that* horse had the same sire as Red Lance. He too could run. Bill knew it was a reckless thing for Faegly still to carry the girl because of the extra weight it put upon his horse. But was Ad counting that he could reach Last Coulee, the many-branched valley leading out of the Cypress Hills? Though the hills were treeless this wide gully had water and was choked with a growth of quaking asp, black poplar and willows. It wouldn't make a permanent refuge, but a good temporary one. And since he'd been riding this range, Faegly knew it and Bill did not.

Red Lance was running faster than Bill had ever been carried in his life. But he was still running wild. With all the skill he had Bill sought to quiet him. But how could he when fear was in himself too?

Fear for the safety of Moira. It had suddenly become a personal thing, yet greater a hundred times than any fear Bill had ever felt for himself. For it had burned through to his realization at last what Moira meant to him. That there was no other girl like her. And no other or him! Mixed-up thoughts began coming to him.

Suppose the half-broken sorrel stepped in a badger hole! Suppose Red Lance did—and broke a leg! Bill knew he had to stop ideas like that. And perhaps that fight inside himself made him know better how to draw out the fear from the big horse too. How to bend the red-bay's splendid will with his own.

"Steady—boy—steady. Come out of it, big fellow. Let's go!"

RED LANCE was beginning to answer knee and rein around holes and on cut-offs when Faegly swerved his course to follow ridges or choose crossings of shallow coulees. And the bay was gaining. But was it fast enough? In the test of the finish, would he obey?

At least three more miles of uneven prairie reeled back under drumming hoofs. Their beat on the sod was slower now, the gait a labored one. Faegly began to shoot.

Moira clutched his arm and the first bullet went wild. But Faegly, who was riding behind the saddle while Moira was in the seat, twisted one of her arms upward behind her till the girl was helpless with pain. Recklessly Ad fired again and again, aiming at Bill's horse. That was the biggest target.

The roars of the gun didn't turn Red Lance. Tired as he was, he strained ahead. Then Bill felt him break stride, shudder, felt it with a wrench at every nerve in himself. But the bay recovered and kept on. The six-shooter was empty now. Faegly couldn't keep that grip on Moira and reload the gun.

The sorrel was running along the rim of a shallow but steep-banked coulee. A dangerous place, but Bill gave Red Lance the knee and rein to close in. And Red Lance obeyed like a bull-dogger's pony. Faegly struck with the empty gun. It jarred numbingly on Bill's upflung forearm.

But that same arm, with an iron fist, struck Faegly over the kidney, for an instant doubling him forward, breaking his grip. Moira's arms went out to Bill. He caught her, lifted her from the saddle. The weary Red Lance lurched under the sudden side-weight, but kept his feet. The spent sorrel staggered at the shift, tripped, rolled down the bank of the coulee.

Bill pulled up. The laboring gallop of Red Lance came to a stop in a few yards. The man and girl looked quickly over the bank of the coulee. Moira shuddered and Bill reined away. That had been one time a horse had fallen and Ad Faegly hadn't been quick enough.

Bill let Moira gently to the ground and was swiftly beside her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked breathlessly, unable to keep from holding her in his arms.

"No," she said, struggling free. "But look! Look at Red Lance!" Blood was flowing from the chest of the big horse.

Bill made a quick examination. "It's too low for his lungs," he stated. "Lodged in his breast-bone, probably." He shook his head in wonder. "Lord, what a knock it must have given him! But he came right on for more!"

"Will he live?" Moira questioned in a strained voice. Her shoulders were quivering.

"You bet," said Bill. "And I don't think he's wind-broken either. We'll have to walk him a little to cool him slowly so's he won't stiffen. He's a job for a vet—but a Mountie may ride him yet some day."

"Oh!" Moira said in a small voice. Bill felt some of the gladness his assurance had brought go again from her.

"That's right," Bill recalled, "*you* wanted him."

"Not half so much," she answered, "as I now want to give him to you. And how can I ever thank you?"

Bill hushed her. "You don't thank a Mountie for what he does in line of duty. Moira," he said, "I've a furlough due me. May I spend it at the Broken Spur?"

"Of course!" she responded quickly. "We'll be more than glad to have you."

"I'd like to help you take care of Red Lance," Bill explained. "Help you start training him. And—" He drew a quick breath and his brown cheeks reddened but his blue-grey eyes looked into hers with a burning earnestness. "And, Moira, I want to teach you to love me."

Moira's eyes widened but warmed too, and looked steadily back at Bill's.

"If you're as good at it as you are at training horses. . . ." Her low, rich laugh seemed the perfect way to finish that.

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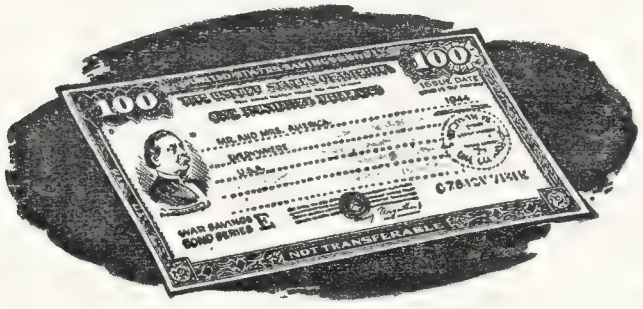

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Sixgun Professor

By Robert Dale Denver

THE STORY SO FAR:

The trail of his brother's murderer takes JUCK SPENCE to far-off Dragoon Valley as the teacher of the local school which has been terrorized by a gang of young ruffians. This valley is contested land, on which a government commission is about to make a decision—whether it is best fitted for farming and fruit-growing and therefore should be left in the hands of the settlers, or whether it is ranch country. If the decision is the latter, the wily lawyer, ELI CRABBE, and his Eastern millionaire partner, OLIVER GORINGTON, will claim it because of an old land grant.

Leader of the settlers is JOHN DRUMMOND who runs Fort Dragoon's general store to which men are drawn as much by his pretty daughter TESS as by the need for supplies. Among Tess's admirers are the faintly ridiculous postmaster, SHAD KITTREDGE, and the prosperous rancher, VANCE TALMAN, who is Eli Crabbe's nephew and supporting his claim.

To maintain order in his school Juck has first to lick the roughnecks from the town of Pedragon—COALY and GOAT HARMS, sons of saloonkeeper IKE HARMS, and their gunman pal, BUCK-TOOTH KANE. Then, when the settlers' work horses are driven off, Juck leads the party that regains them. While the men are away on the search the women uncover a plot to cut down the peach orchard. Tess, MRS. McGUIGAN of the hotel and GRANNY DOSS, who fought Indians in her youth, persuade the women to take up guns, and they scare the marauders off.

But there is more plotting afoot. When Crabbe learns that Juck is in the valley, he sends his killer, RUDD LAMPER, over to Fort Dragoon to play drunk and convince the settlers that Juck is in with the Crabbe-Gorington gang.

PART TWO

JUCK SPENCE, ignoring Rudd Lamper's command, kept stepping forward, and when Lamper finally whipped his hand swiftly to the holstered Colt on his left hip, it was too late. Juck's fist shot out straight, crashing into the hatchet face just as Lamper's hand touched the gun butt. Before the impact, Lamper went back, stepping fast to keep his balance and dazedly still trying to draw the six-shooter.

He got the weapon clear of leather just as Juck crashed another right into his jaw, so hard that Lamper buckled at the knees and went down with Juck on top of him, one hand clamped on the gunman's wrist, the other on the barrel of the six-shooter.

Rudd Lamper looked lean but he had a deceptive strength and the pair fought tigerishly for possession of the weapon. To Lamper, losing his gun was like losing life itself. Slowly, inexorably the barrel turned toward Juck's middle. Tess Drummond screamed and her father started to rush in, but at that instant Juck, with a desperate surge of strength, swung the gun barrel away from him and wrenched the weapon away.

It slid out of Juck's hands to clump on the ground, while the two men, on their feet again, hammered each other with fists. Lamper was unbelievably fast. Coming in close he gouged at Juck's eyes and, failing in that, clawed Juck in the face instead, bringing blood. Juck jarred Lamper with savage rights and lefts to the man's ribs, and unable to take the punishment, Lamper turned to dart for his gun.

He did not get far. Juck pounced on him, yanking him around and forcing Lamper to turn and fight. Juck smashed repeatedly to the heart, and Lamper grunted hard and began to breathe like a wind-broken horse. Blood was running down the gunman's face from a split in the skin over a cheekbone. Juck widened the cut, battering with hard knuckles, sending in one whistling right that all but tore Lamper's ear from his head.

The fury that possessed Juck Spence was something that he could not have explained unless it was based on the possibility that this was the man who had murdered his brother. Juck knew only that a deadly urge was in him to batter into insensibility this man with the reputation of a hired killer, and when he was laid flat, grind a boot heel into his face.

Lamper began to whimper under the beating, his breath came in a loud sobbing and finally he slumped into Spence, clinging weakly with his arms. Juck, suddenly realizing he was punishing a hopelessly licked man, turned away ashamed of his savagery before women witnesses—Tess Drummond, Mrs. McGuigan and several other who had watched the fight.

Lamper got up weakly. He tried to say something but his puffed lips moved without sound. Then, each step an effort, he staggered to his horse and, after three attempts, pulled himself into the saddle. Settling himself, clamping both hands to the saddle horn, he rode slowly away.

Juck Spence dabbed blood from his face, dusted his hat. Shad Kittredge had picked up

Lamper's gun. It was Shad Kittredge's malicious voice that broke the silence.

"What did I tell you?" he asked. "This Spence is in the pay of Talman and Crabbe and Gorington. That drunken pal of his gave away the show and Spence got so mad he a'most beat him to death. He came here as their spy. We ought to string him up."

"You're crazy," said Drummond. "How about his getting back those horses that was stole from us? No spy for Talman would have done that."

Shad was only momentarily silenced. "He couldn't help himself there. Or maybe it was all a put-up job—the stealin'—so Juck could be a hero in gettin' 'em back and we'd trust him. But he never pulled no wool over my eyes."

"You always were smart, weren't you, Shad?" Spence said ironically, but Juck knew by the sober faces that at least some of the watching group believed as Shad did—that Juck was a spy. Tess Drummond's pretty face wore a frown.

"Looks bad for me, don't it?" asked Juck, the anger suddenly flaring up in him. "A man I only saw once in my life before rides in and claims he's my partner in working for Talman and Crabbe. I can see how it looks to you folks, but I'm telling you that Rudd Lamper lied. I came up to this country to find out who killed my brother Dan, down in the San Benitos. I suspect this Lamper is the man that did it. If I'd been sure, he'd never have gotten up just now."

Shad laughed sneeringly. "That sounds reasonable, lookin' for your brother's murderer up here, with the San Benitos way down south. So that was Rudd Lamper, the killer. I'm ridin' out to bring in the settlers for a meetin' to see if they want a school teacher that Rudd Lamper claims for a friend."

"That wasn't no friendly fight," observed the old ex-bugler, Tootin' Sam Parker, in defence of Juck.

"Naturally not," said Shad, waving Lamper's revolver excitedly. "Spence was mad account Lamper spoiled his game of comin' in here to work as a spy for Talman. For two cents I'd use Lamper's gun right now to—"

Drummond walked over to Shad. He ordered, "Give me that gun. There'll be a meeting tonight to go over this and decide what to do. It'll be a fair meeting, Juck."

It was on Spence's tongue to tell them that they need not bother with a hearing. If the people did not trust him, he would ride out. He could see their side of it however, and Drummond and Tootin' Sam by their words and manner had indicated their faith in him. Tess still wore her troubled frown.

Juck Spence turned to go to Mrs. McGuigan's place to wash up for supper. Tess Drummond looked as if she wanted to speak to him, but he didn't cross over. He had stated his case. If she didn't believe him, all right.

Shad Kittredge loped out triumphantly to summon the settlers for a meeting at the Drummond store.

Mrs. McGuigan said little as she served Juck supper, but as he finished eating and she and and Juck both rolled cigarettes, she spoke up sharply. "There's only one thing, they ought to send you out of here for. For not taking that Rudd Lamper's gun and blowing out his light for good."

"You may be right there, Mrs. McGuigan ma'am," Juck admitted. "Anyway I'm afraid my future as a 'professor' is wrecked. Just when I was gettin' good in spelling again too—almost as good as some of my little fifth-grade scholars. And I'm sure going to miss your peach pies, And your stewed peaches. Likewise your pickled peaches. And your peach jam and peach butter and peach preserves. Some of these days I won't be shocked much if I sprout a few pink peach blossoms."

AT THE community meeting in the Drummond store that night, Juck was called on to give his story to the men who were sitting on boxes and kegs and counters. He told how he and his brother had ranched in the San Benitos and of the small-sized range war that had started after Lawyer Crabbe had foreclosed on a neighboring ranch. That he had been wounded and forced to spend months in a hospital in a battle with Crabbe's crew while his brother Dan had later been shot in the back and killed by an unknown.

Judge Whitney, the lawyer representing the Fort Dragoon settlers, Juck went on, could testify to the truth of his story. He had known the Spence families for years and would vouch that Juck had come to take the school teaching job at Fort Dragoon in good faith.

Shad Kittredge acted as prosecuting attorney, insinuating, sneering at Juck's statements until Juck had difficulty in holding his temper. Drummond, Tootin' Sam Parker and

several others plainly believed Juck's story, but he could see puzzled doubt on the faces of the rest. Since Juck's success in tracking down the horse thieves that had robbed the community of practically all its horses, Shad Kittredge had been industriously planting suspicion against Juck.

To these men the words in which Rudd Lamper had greeted Juck as a partner in working of Crabbe and Talman were damning. All of them knew of Lamper's reputation as a hired killer, and it just didn't seem plausible that a man like Lamper would claim Juck as friend if it were not true. That Lamper was apparently drunk at the time he made his claim all the more convincing.

Juck went out to let them decide and found Tess on the log seat in front of the McGuigan House, sitting with arms hugging her knees. He sat down beside her.

"I suppose those fools think you're a liar," said the girl.

Juck grinned. "I reckon so. Don't you?"

She made no direct answer to that. "Some day I'm going to wring Shad's long neck. I'm just waiting to grow up a little more."

The door of the store opened, letting out a flood of light. Drummond walked across, with Amos Dunkerly and Sam Parker.

"I'm sorry, Juck," said Drummond, but the vote went against you. It was close but they decided you should quit teaching here. At least until we write Judge Whitney and he can write back that he'll vouch for you."

Juck nodded. "All right," he said quietly. "But you're making a mistake. I'd like to be here with you folks."

Drummond said, "And I'd like to have you. But we're fighting here for big stakes—our homes, land, maybe our lives. Some of the men feel they can't afford to take chances until they hear from Judge Whitney. Why don't you stay until we hear?"

"No, I might as well pull out tonight. I hope you win out." He shook hands with the three men and found that Tess had slipped away without a word.

He settled his bill with Mrs. McGuigan and, bringing out a slicker roll, saddled his buckskin and prepared to leave. He did a slow job of saddling, disappointed more than he would admit that Tess had gone away without saying good-by.

As he led his horse toward the watering trough, a slim shadow came around the side of a building.

"I brought you another apple, Professor," said the owner of the shadow. "Maybe it'll bring you good luck. And I brought you a letter besides the apple. Shad hadn't the mail all distributed when you were in the post office. He gave this to me to give to you. Shad thought you might be in a bad temper after you've been exiled."

TESS'S voice became suddenly dispirited. "I hate them for what they did to you. I thing none of them except Shad really believed you were a spy, but they were afraid you'd make trouble. You might hunt up a gunfight with Lamper and it would put a bad name on Fort Dragoon. Which is silly. You could have killed Lamper if you had wanted to, but you didn't."

"I didn't know your folks objected to using guns," remarked Juck. "They must have forgotten the fight with the horse thieves. And what did you women use the other night in turning back those hombres that wanted to cut down the peach orchard—pea-shooters?"

"We used guns. And we'll use them again. But they hope to keep it quiet here so that those land court appraisers who are to judge if we're entitled to stay here or not will decide that we're a peaceable sort. Men think that will be in our favor."

"Crabbe will never let this be settled without war—unless he can win with some sort of trickery. But what makes you so sure I'm not Mr. Crabbe's spy?"

Tess laughed teasingly. "Maybe it's the way, Professor, you led the singing of *My Country 'Tis of Thee*. You haven't a very good voice, Juck, and you can't carry a tune, but you sang that song as if you meant it."

He chuckled at that bit of feminine logic. "I'll tell you a secret, Tess; I'm not leaving here for long. Or any place where you are. I'll be back. So don't you folks shoot when you see me riding in again."

"We won't shoot," she promised, and sobered. "Don't stay too long. There's something that worries me, Juck. If you find that Lamper killed your brother, you won't think it's your place to kill him in revenge?"

"It won't be revenge," he said patiently. "It will be justice as I see it. Somebody bushwhacked my brother, got him in the back. I think it was Rudd Lamper, and if I find out for sure it was Lamper and that Crabbe hired him, I'm settling with both men. I'd like to see both of them hanged, but the law would

never touch Eli Crabbe. That makes it my job as I see it, to see they get justice."

Tess Drummond shook her head. "You're mistaken. It's not your job. It's your job to see that the law brings justice to those men. There's no man that's too high for the law to reach him, if someone works hard enough to convict him. You had a right to shoot Rudd Lamper today in self-defense, but you've no right to be judge, jury and executioner on him. That would only be making yourself into a one-man mob. You wouldn't do it, Juck. These children you taught here, they like and respect you. You don't want them to hear that Juck Spence shot a man because he'd decided that man was a murderer."

HE WAS silent for a moment. What she had said troubled him. At times, thinking of his brother's cold-blooded killing, he flared up to where he could have ended the murderer as he would have exterminated a rattler. At other times, he didn't know.

"At least I wouldn't want them to hear that I'd killed a man without giving the law a chance to deal out justice," he admitted. "There's no use of going any further on that just now. There's something even bigger up here than to get justice done murderers. That's helping you folks to win. This valley is intended for people like you—not for hogs like Crabbe and Talman and Gorington. This country is for a lot of people, not for a few. And I'll fight to help you people get it."

"I know you would," she said softly. "You already have."

"Part of my reason," he went on, "is selfish. I saw a valley up in the mountains beyond the Painted Hills where I'd like to build a ranch if I ever have one again. I want that mountain ranch for us, Tess. You and me. Before I went away I wanted to tell you something, Tess. That I love you. I guess, looking back, I loved you when I first stepped off that stagecoach."

They were standing close, with the stars over them, and to Tess Drummond his words were as wonderful as the galaxies overhead. Her heart thudded in sudden exaltation; she realized she had been wanting to hear them.

There were no words that could begin to express all that welled up in her, nothing except the simple ones in her half whisper, "I love you too, Juck."

When their lips met with his arms about her, it was in a short kiss, as if in them both lay the bitter knowledge that, faced with a future as uncertain and trouble-filled as theirs, they could now have only fleeting moments of tenderness. Their first kiss was almost as sober and as serious as the problems that confronted them.

"That was for good luck," Tess said, her voice a little tremulous. ""Good-by, Professor. You won't stay away long." She was crying suddenly. "I'm afraid, Juck! Afraid of what might happen to you. And I'm afraid of what's coming here at Dragoon, and I want you here with us, with me. We need you."

As if to shut out the terror that made the girl cry, Juck drew her almost fiercely into his arms again. This time his hard kiss seemed to fling a challenge at all the dark threats of the future, and his courage seemed to flow into her and become part of her.

He jogged away, and it was as if his horse trod on the starry roof of the night. It was only when he topped the ridge between Dragoon and Pedragon that he thought of the letter Tess had given him. He lighted a match and saw that it was addressed in the handwriting of Dee Burdick, the ex-Texas Ranger whom he had employed to investigate his brother's murder.

"Friend Juck," Burdick had begun it. "First thing I found out was Rudd Lamper was lying in saying he hadn't been in the San Benitos for years. He was seen there the day before your brother was found dead. He was seen by three cowboys of the Q outfit south of Gordo. They saw him alone and riding from the east. They identified him by a photograph I got out of a paper printed the time he was being tried for that sheepherder murder. He was riding a chunky bay horse and they seen him not more than five miles from your ranch where Dan was killed and only a few hours before Dan was shot, as near as the doctor could tell when your brother was drygulched.

"Lamper didn't see the cowboys. The way I found these three I looked up all the fellows that had passed through the country around that time. Found the three Q cowboys had gone through with a bunch of saddle horses and I rode down to the Q outfit to ask if they saw anyone. They sure had.

"This ain't positive proof, but if Lamper says he was in the San Benitos, the polecat sure lied. It looks as if he might of come from the old Juan Paz ranch Crabbe owns over on Cibola Creek. I'm back-tracking on him and I'll write you again. Yours, Dee Burdick."

Juck crumpled the letter, shoved it into his pocket and swung back into his saddle. As he rode anger seethed up in him until it was a flaming core of rage.

SLOWLY he got control of himself. As Dee Burdick said, there was no positive proof. Lamper could say he'd denied being in the San Benitos at the time of Dan Spence's murder, because, since he was a killer by reputation, suspicion would be thrown on him.

If proof could be gotten against Lamper, Dee Burdick was the man to get it. Burdick had been a famous outlaw trailer as Texas Ranger. Knowing Burdick, Juck was sure Burdick considered Lamper guilty. Juck himself was willing to gamble his life on the man's guilt, sure enough of it to follow Rudd Lamper now and end the man. Which would likely end all chance of proving Crabbe's connection with the murder. And Rudd Lamper had only been the long-distance weapon of Crabbe, nearly 200 miles away at the time. Even if he had not promised Tess to let the law handle Lamper, a showdown with Lamper had to be postponed in the hope of getting evidence against Crabbe.

Why Lamper should have come to Fort Dragoon to claim that Juck was working for the Crabbe-Talman-Gorgington trio was puzzling, unless it was simply a device to have the Fort Dragoon settlers get rid of Juck and thereby lose the help Juck could give them. Which placed a much higher value on Juck's prospective aid to the settlers than he himself put.

Matches lighted at intervals showed that Lamper, after leaving Fort Dragoon, had continued riding along the stagecoach road. When this road forked, one branch turning off toward Pedragon, Spence dismounted and, lighting a match, saw that Lamper's horse had taken the Pedragon fork.

Juck swung his buckskin to follow just as the moon pushed itself about the range. He had never been at Pedragon, which had been built to house saloons, dance halls, gambling places to cater to Fort Dragoon garrisons. Juck had seen the place from a distance, in a flat surrounded by rocky, broken hills. Its adobe buildings looked much like those of Fort Dragoon, although fewer and on a smaller scale.

There was no reason why he should not ride boldly into the place. He was not afraid of the Harms brothers nor of Buck-Tooth Kane who had threatened to kill him. As for Rudd Lamper, who was more dangerous than the Harms boys and Buck-Tooth put together, Juck would like nothing better than to walk up to the killer and accuse him baldly of having bushwhacked Dan Spence. And likely, he admitted to himself, that was what he would do if he rode in and tied his horse to a hitch-rack.

Riding over a little rise, he looked down on the lights of the place. Unable to trust himself to ride in to the place, he swung from the trail to drop into a deep arroyo which ran close to the back of the settlement. Through the night came drunken shouts and the blasts of a six-shooter being emptied into the sky. Pedragon considered itself tough, and the racket seemed to bear that out.

Leaving his horse tied to a brush clump in the arroyo bottom when he was not far from the settlement, he kept on afoot, walking between clay cut-banks some ten feet high.

When he judged by the loudness of the noise that he was already in back of Pedragon, he climbed out by a steep goat-like path, to find himself some 50 yards from the back of the nearest of the clutter of adobe buildings. Unlike Fort Dragoon the settlement, even in the flattering moonlight, looked ugly.

Moving cautiously, taking advantage of a few cloaking pinions and juniper brush, he got to a place where he could see the only street. Half a dozen horses stood at the hitch-racks in front of a long adobe-walled building he guessed to be the saloon of Ike Harms.

INSIDE, someone was pounding a piano, badly out of tune. Rising above the music came a hoarse cursing argument and then the shrill laughter of a woman. Juck looked closely at the saddled horses. One he identified as Rudd Lamper's, but the others appeared to be cow horses and the rigs those of real cowmen. Which was queer, since Pedragon was not a center for ranch country. The nearest outfit was that of Talman many miles to the south, while to the north and east there were fifty miles of unoccupied country. West was the Dragoon Valley.

As he watched, three men came riding up from the north to line their horses up with the others. A few minutes later two men jogged in from the south, one Vance Talman, towering a good two or three inches above his companions.

Talman called, "Hello, Rudd," evidently to

the man who was standing in the saloon doorway.

Lamper returned "Hello" mumblingly, handicapped evidently by the battering his mouth had received from Juck's fists.

"How'd you come out?" asked Talman as he jingled spurs toward the saloon entrance. Then in surprise, "He didn't do that to your face, did he?"

"Damn him," burst out Lamper in his thickened voice. "I'm gettin' him. He jumped me when I wasn't lookin' and took away my gun. I'll see him put under dirt for that."

"Looks like he sure manhandled you," said Talman. "Lucky for you he didn't take a strap to your back side like he did to Buck-Tooth."

"I'm gittin' pay for that," said the shrill, excited voice Juck recalled as belonging to his former pupil, Buck-Tooth Kane. "I'll shoot him and drag him out in the badlands for the coyotes to eat."

"My, my, what rough talk," Juck muttered grimly, hand on his six-shooter. "There seems to be real competition who's to put the first chunk of lead into me."

Talman and his companion walked into the bar to exchange jovial greetings with men already there. One side window gave Juck a view of the big barroom. Behind the bar was a barrel of a man that Juck had seen in Fort Dragoon, Ike Harms. Talman and some half-dozen cowmen were lined up at one end of the long redwood bar. Lamper, the Harms boys and Buck-Tooth Kane were at the other end. In addition a dozen men were either playing poker or watching a game at a big round table.

After a few drinks the cowmen went into a back room to which Ike Harms carried a lamp. The window here was so high that Juck could not look into it. Juck had never listened in on anyone's talk in his life and he hated to begin now. Besides, it seemed unlikely that he could hear anything through a thick adobe wall with the only window closed.

Moving along the side of the building he saw, by the light that came through the dirty window-panes, a rickety barrel lying on its side. He might as well try to get an earful of talk, he decided and, rolling it under the window, he got up gingerly on it.

In the bare-walled room Talman and eight weather-beaten cowmen sat about a round table bearing glasses and two quart bottles of whiskey. Standing behind Talman was Rudd Lamper.

Lamper was talking. His voice was still thick but anger rode it so loud that it came through to Juck.

"I'm telling you," Lamper was saying, "that Spence is a hell on wheels. He's got to be put out o' the way."

"You'll wait till you get orders on that," said Talman angrily. "Crabbe told you how to handle him."

"To hell with what Crabbe said," said Lamper. "I'm getting him first chance I git and I'm hunting me up the chance. He accused me of killing his brother. I'm no killer." Rudd was not acting drunk now; he actually was drunk. He downed a half-tumbler of whiskey, throwing it down his throat.

"I'm not in favor of you being in this country at all, Lamper," said Talman. "You'll do as you're ordered or get out. I'm ramroddin' things up here, and I got no time to talk to you now. I got business with these men."

LAMPER snarled at Talman, but he obeyed the big cowman's hint and left the room.

A small swart-faced cowman talked in a murmur too low for Juck's ears. Talman, his voice lowered now, turned to another of the men who also spoke in a drawl too low for Juck's ear. Juck swore silently because he was unable to overhead the talk. Those were all cowmen, hard-bitten men whose business it was to handle stock. They weren't gunmen although they were all armed. What business did Talman have with them?

He was straining to get closer to the window when, without warning, the shaky barrel under him began to go down. Before Juck could leap to the ground, the barrel collapsed with a loud crash.

Someone standing outside the saloon heard the crash and ran to the corner before Juck could scuttle out of sight. Sharp eyes identified him in the moonlight.

"It's the Dragoon perfessor—that Spence!" came in the snarly high-pitched voice of Buck-Tooth Kane. "Spyin' around here. Git him out back!"

Juck ducked around the corner just as Buck-Tooth got his six-shooter into action, sending a shot that whistled by Juck's head. He started to run to the ravine to get his horse, but the pound of boots from the room to the back door told him that would be suicide. Some man started to step out the back door, but Spence's shot drove him back. The crash of glass told Juck that guns would be waiting at

the window of the room occupied by Talman's crowd. Men were spilling out of the barroom.

"Get him!" he could hear Talman's bawl from the interior of the building. "Get him! Cut him down!" Evidently Talman, who had just told Lamper to let Spence alone, had changed his mind.

With the cowmen in the chase and all the loafers in the town joining in, Juck would be one against 30. The odds were small that he would ever get out of Pedragon alive.

He sent a shot smoking into the back door to keep the men there herded inside and slipped in two cartridges to keep his cylinder filled. The arroyo was his only hope of escape, but if he ran toward it his back would be an easy target in the bright moonlight for a dozen guns. Likewise he was cut off from flight to buildings to the right or left of Harms' saloon. The high squall of Buck-Tooth Kane sounded. Somewhere hurrying to get within gun range would be Rudd Lamper.

He turned to the corner again, sticking out his hat. A bullet went through it.

He glanced up at the wall; it was of unplastered adobe bricks. Dashing rains had hollowed a few bricks, making apertures. Juck had never climbed an adobe wall before, but he was agile and desperate and he had no choice. Holstering his six-shooter, he got one boot toe in a hole and lunged upward with a hand for another hole left by a broken brick.

REACHING it, he lifted his other boot and found another hole, or maybe he didn't need any; at any rate he was high enough so that the fingers of one hand came up over the low parapet. The brick crumbled but his other hand clamped a hold and, digging in his toes, he drew himself up to flatten on of the roof.

The parapet was only one brick wide and, unlike the high parapet at Fort Dragoon, less than a foot high. Over the flat roof, he ran on hands and knees to the front of the building to take a look-see. A dozen men were below him, with guns drawn. No escape that way, although the shouting had scared some of the horses which had not been tied to hitch-racks. These started off, dragging their grounded reins and taking away some of Juck's hunters.

He crossed the roof to look over the side to the north. Some feet from him was the flat roof of an adjoining buildings. The space between the buildings ordinarily would have made him hesitate, but again he had no choice. They would soon guess he had escaped to the roof and follow. He backed up and went over in a running leap, to land on his feet and hands, cutting one hand on a broken bottle.

The shouts were louder and pounding boots testified that the men were scattering to beat through the straggling growth of trees and brush between the buildings and the arroyo. Other pursuers were swinging into saddles to join the search.

A few feet from the building Juck now was on, stood a low-roofed shed. Between the two structures was a single man, rifle in his hands, watching. Juck identified young Coaly Harms.

"Get a ladder and climb to the roof," came Talman's bellow. "And watch that he don't make a break and git to one of those horses out front."

His time on the roofs was short. Juck slipped over the parapet to come plummeting onto Coaly Harms. Harms went down under the weight with a startled squawk. Before he could give another sound Juck had him by the throat.

"Open your mouth and I'll ram my six-shooter barrel down it," he muttered.

The threat was enough to silence Coaly. Juck took Coaly's rifle and got to his feet. With the six-shooter barrel in Harms' side he ordered Coaly to get up also.

"We're heading for the arroyo," he told Coaly. "You and me together."

"They'll try to kill us both if we do," whispered the youth.

"I'll kill you for sure if you don't," said Juck. "Start travelin' for the arroyo, about six foot ahead of me. One yap out of you and it'll be your last. *Andale.*"

They started on a trot, leaving the shadows of the building to strike openly for the arroyo. Alone Juck would have been identified at once. Accompanied by Coaly he seemed to escape all suspicion. Men were running about and horsemen were trotting back and forth through the brush while groups got ladders to scramble up on the roof. Voices sounded in eager yells —the most thrilling of all hunts is the hunt for a fellow man.

SOMEONE yelled at the pair heading for the arroyo, Spence six feet back of Coaly. Spence ordered Coaly to stop.

"You two go along the bank of that arroyo!" shouted Talman. "See if you can find his horse."

Spence chuckled at that and they went on.

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reaching the arroyo with the bank falling sheer before them. No searcher was within 30 feet and Juck repressed an urge to jump down and risk a broken ankle to make a beeline for his horse. Instead he kept Coaly drifting along the arroyo rim, getting nearer and nearer to the place where Juck had tied the buckskin.

When they came to a little side ditch dropping into the arroyo, he prodded Coaly into it, sliding down after him.

Just then a horseman riding along the bank of the arroyo pulled up.

"Hey, who's that down there?" he called.

"It's Spence!" yelled Coaly Harms and dropped flat to the ground.

Juck sent two shots at the rider looming on the bank and then sprinted for his horse, to until the reins in one motion and fling one up over the equine's neck.

Next instant he was up into the saddle, swinging the horse and spurring hard. Coaly Harms was shouting excitedly, "It's Spence! It's Spence!"

"S'long, Harmsy boy," Juck called jeeringly. They should have called you by some other name—no harm in a corral full of rabbits like you."

SPENCE had the buckskin clattering at full speed over the stones of the arroyo bottom when the first shot came whistling overhead. Before the second came he had flashed around a bend in the twisting, steep-banked trough.

Horsemen were pounding toward the arroyo and Juck, not wanting to be trapped within its narrow walls, turned at the first break to send his horse scrambling up the bank opposite from Pedragon. The pursuers saw him again, and a furious volley of shots followed as he raced into one of a chain of brushy little hills directly east of the town. Halting there, he listened to see if anyone were trying to follow him.

But after a little useless crashing around in the brush the horsemen gave up the chase as a bad job and returned to the settlement.

Juck circled to wait at a place close to the trail leading north out of Pedragon. Along that trail three of the cowmen had ridden in, evidently to meet Talman. Juck was wondering why.

An hour later the trio jogged past, heading north on the trail, an old freight road left from

army days. At a discreet distance Juck followed them as they traveled steadily northeast, climbing a high ridge bordering Dragoon Valley, to drop into a valley that in size dwarfed the Dragoon.

Juck simply kept in the trail as the three jogged on hour after hour. Near dawn they halted, making a little fire to boil coffee, Juck judged. He watched until they rode out again at sunrise and again he followed, keeping far enough back to avoid being seen.

The valley stretched out seemingly as empty as an ocean until after sunup, when far to the northeast Juck saw two snaky clouds of lemon-colored dust floating in the air. A little to the south was another.

The dust clouds, Juck knew, must be raised by cattle, three trail herds. The three riders he had followed were separating, two to ride toward the snake plumes to the northeast, the other man toward the herd almost directly east. The trio who had come in to see Talman, Juck guessed, were the herd bosses.

He dropped the pursuit and climbed a little flat mesa to watch. Three columns of cattle, each containing two or three thousand head, were moving toward the entrance to Dragoon Valley. Each was accompanied by a few extra saddle horses and a chuck wagon.

The cattle were moving in the general direction of the Dragoon Valley—but he needed more exact knowledge than that. Circling far to the rear of the snail-like columns he found the camp of a prospector, digging a shaft in the side of a small cone-shaped peak. The prospector, lonesome for company, insisted on Juck's eating a meal with him.

He had gotten some fresh beef from one of the herds and he knew where the cattle had come from: Little Paz River, and they were all from a big ranch owned by Eli Crabbe and his partner, Gorington. Cowboys had told him they were bound for Old Fort Dragoon.

Juck digested this information along with the meal and slept in the prospector's cabin that afternoon a few hours. There were other cattlemen who had met Talman at Pedragon. Juck decided to find out if other herds were marching toward Dragoon and how many.

RIDING almost straight south, until nine o'clock, he was lucky enough to run onto the campfire of a rancher hunting some lost horses. Again by asking a few casual questions about a job, Juck found that

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two herds of cattle were traveling from the east headed for Fort Dragoon. They were back about 40 miles, the man said. Another herd was moving in from farther southeast also. All were from ranches owned by Crabbe and Gorington. Juck did some arithmetic. Six herds, around 15,000 head, maybe more, all bound for Fort Dragoon. Why?

The next morning early Juck headed west in the approximate direction of Talman's ranch. At a little Mexican community he learned that a big roundup was in progress on the Talman ranch; the cattle were to be moved to Fort Dragoon. Talman was reported to be running all of 20,000 head, and if he gathered only half of them to drive to Dragoon, at least 25,000 cattle were due to hit the Dragoon Valley at about the same time. The grass in the valley was well started, but there wasn't enough to feed a fraction of that number. Held in the valley a few weeks they would tramp down the grass, break through fences to eat the wheat in the settler's fields.

Heading back to Fort Dragoon, he arrived in the afternoon to find John Drummond, Tootin' Sam Parker, the blacksmith-coal miner Zeb Trotter and Shad Kittredge, and a few others waiting for the arrival of the stage. Tess came out of the store and her face lighted up.

"We told you to leave," growled the lank postmaster, Shad Kittredge. "What yuh wantin' back here?"

"Come to bring you folks some news," said Juck. "Bad news. Lots of cattle headed for the Dragoon. Twenty-five thousand head, maybe more. Looks as if all the cattle north of the Mexican Border must be coming this way."

"They ain't that many cattle in a hundred miles," protested Shad Kittredge.

"I saw three herds northeast of here; they're coming to Fort Dragoon. Ran into a cattle rancher southeast of Pedragon and he told me three more herds owned by Crabbe and Gorington are headed here. Also, Talman is rounding up to move a lot of his cattle. Six herds besides the cattle Talman is gathering, all heading for this valley. If you don't believe me, Shad, ride out and see 'em for yourself."

"We believe you all right," said Drummond. "You're not one to raise a big alarm over nothing, and only one reason for all those cattle coming here. To eat out the valley. They'll have it down to grass roots in a week, and after that they'll break fences and eat the wheat fields. That's what Talman meant when he said once that Dragoon Valley would look like a desert when the land experts came. And that many cattle means 60 riders or more—a regular army."

"We'll ride out agin that army," planned Kittredge. "Git your horses. We'll turn 'em back with guns."

"That's just what they'd like you to try," pointed out Spence. "It would tickle 'em to have you jump them and try to turn those herds back by force. That way you'd be startin' a gun war where you'd be outnumbered bad, besides being in the wrong. This valley is open range. They have a right to bring cattle on it."

"We'd better send a messenger to the railroad with a telegram to Judge Whitney askin' him for advice," said a man named Morley. "To ask him to try to get those land men sent up to look at the valley 'fore those herds arrive."

"You can't hurry them gover'ment men," remarked Tootin' Sam Parker. "They ain't due for another two-three weeks. If those cows come in here, we might as well load up our furniture and move out. We can tell those land men how the valley looked before it was et off, but who'd believe us? Spence, you shore done us a service in coming back to tell us of this after we ordered you out. We been sorry for it ever since you left. Guess our kids got us to feeling we'd done wrong. They liked your teachin' and it made 'em mighty mad when they found out we'd voted you to leave."

DRUMMOND nodded. "That's right. Since you left, Juck, all of us decided that we'd made a big mistake. We owe you an apology."

Juck grinned. "Forget it. I was a little on the prod when I left, but considering the kind of people you're fighting, I couldn't blame you. It's lucky anyway that I lit a shuck out of here. Rode to Pedragon and found a bunch of cattlemen that had come to meet Talman. Followed three of 'em north and run onto their herds; found they were all headed right for here.

"Now it seems to me," he went on, "there's one way you might keep out those cattle. The valley has plenty of feed and you can't keep

cattle from coming to eat it, but they need more than feed. Water. As I savvy it, the reason why this country hasn't been used as range is the lack of water. The springs supplying the reservoir here at the fort make the only all-year-'round water. Outside of that this country hasn't got a lot of water."

"Plenty of water," scoffed Shad Kittredge. "There's enough pools left in the river bed to water all the cattle you say is comin' for a few weeks."

"I know that," Juck returned sharply. "But those pools could be emptied. You folks of course know more about the water in the country than I do. But to the north where those three herds are coming across that big sagebrush valley, the prospector told me they had to make a dry drive until they reached that natural lake just outside the valley. I rode past that lake at night, but as I remember the layout, it could be emptied by blowing up the dam.

"South there's the small reservoir behind the dam near the stage station, and around the country there's a few water holes. If you can get rid of all the water here in the valley and in a belt ten or twenty miles around it, you'll have those cattle stopped. Crabbe and Talman claim this is nothing but desert. Make it a desert as far as water is concerned."

They looked at Juck silently, for so long a time that Tess grew impatient. "Well, what do you say?" she demanded. "Dad and Tootin' Sam, you've both bragged how you've ridden every foot of this country as soldiers. Can it be done or can't it?"

"Give us time to think," said Tootin' Sam Parker, and worried off a corner of a tobacco plug to help in the thinking. "That pump of Zeb Trotter's that he uses to pump out his coal mine can be used to drain ditches," Tootin' Sam went on. "That dam to that lake north c'd be blowed up all right and so c'd that stage dam reservoir. Only it would make Big Mountain Brown mighty mad. Likewise most of the little waterholes around could be emptied by ditching 'em out."

"Yes," agreed Drummond, "and we can get rid of part of those pools along the river by caving in banks on them. The rest can be drained with ditches or pumped out with Trotter's outfit. Twenty-five thousand head of cattle will need a lot of water. Unless it rains."

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NOT a cloud in the sky, and it never rains this time of the year," Tess declared optimistically.

"We couldn't get rid of all the water in this country," objected Shad. "Not a chance. Besides, there ain't time."

"Shad as usual throwing cold water on any idea he didn't think up," scoffed Tess.

"The first herds from the north are due to arrive in about three days," said Juck. "By getting rid of the water farthest away first, we can have to the last minute to work on the water in the valley itself. How much water around Pedragon?"

"Springs enough to supply a few horses and the few hombres there, which ain't much, them Pedragoners drinkin' mostly whiskey and never takin baths," said Tootin' Sam. "We'll have to drain out the fort reservoir or else they'll drive the cattle up here to water. It'll mean a lot of work, and it may mean fighting. Talman will be mighty sore when he finds all the water gone. But let's git goin'. What say, Drummond?"

Drummond nodded. "Tess, you and Tootin' Sam go over to the schoolhouse and draw a map of the country locating all the water on it. Shad, you ride down and bring in the settlers for a powwow."

Shad Kittredge still hung back. "I don't think this is the way to handle this," he protested.

"How would you handle it?" asked Drummond patiently.

"Me, I'd just fight," Shad said, patting the six-shooter at his hip in an ominous way.

"Look, Shad," said Tootin' Sam, "you've done too much thinkin' already. Give your brain a rest; it ain't the kind able to stand too much strain. Git your horse saddled and ride."

Shad mumbled, but he obeyed, riding out to summon the settlers from their little farms. By the time they arrived, the school blackboards were covered with a series of elegant maps drawn by Tess on which were marked all the available water—pools, springs, wells and tanks—for 30 miles around the Dragoon Valley.

Zeb Trotter, the blacksmith and coal mine developer, donated the use of his small but powerful steam pump. The outfit—boiler, engine and pump—could be loaded onto the low-wheeled platform he used to transport it where it was needed. Two crews went south, each

taking blasting powder and a plow and scraper to ditch out waterholes.

SIMILARLY equipped crews went north and west while the remaining settlers went to work along the river bottom, emptying the rocky pools, draining them where possible into the sandy bed. The huge reservoir at the fort, which was used for a water supply ready to irrigate the peach orchard in drouth season, was left to the end. There would be a few small springs remaining when they were done, but the water in them would not be enough to satisfy even the horses used in bringing in the herds. The Painted Hills had water and so had the neighboring mountains, but the cattle would have to be turned loose to take advantage of it.

Juck and Tootin' Sam Parker, with Tootin' Sam's son, made up one crew. They were gone for two days, working from daylight until past dark. Their big job was to blow up the stage station dam which would be expected to supply the herds coming from the southeast and those from the Talman ranch. Since the settlers had contributed the work and teams to build this dam, they figured they had a right to destroy it.

One blast tore a hole in the earth dam, a hole which drained it steadily until there was nothing but a muddy bottom drying under a hot sun. After that they attacked scattered waterholes.

Another crew to the north was using powder to drain the natural lake, and other men were blasting a series of rocky little reservoirs in the hills behind the fort, letting the water spill down a sandy ravine. A few of the farms had dug wells, some 39 feet deep. It was impossible for the cattlemen to raise enough water by buckets to water cattle, but the wells were nevertheless caved in. The settlers' stock would be taken into the fort to be held there.

School had been closed and women and children worked on the river, making bucket chains to empty the small pools which could not be ditched out. Zeb Trotter's portable steam pump worked night and day.

All around the Dragoon country, the little ponds and tanks disappeared until the only water left was in a few pools along the river and the fort reservoir. This reservoir belonged to the settlers, having been purchased with with the fort building, but they would drain it nevertheless, knowing it would be a

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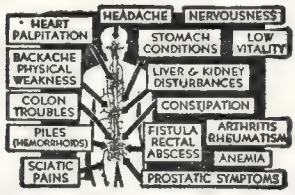

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temptation to Talman to seize it for the use of the herds.

ON THE afternoon of the third day of the campaign to make the Dragoon Valley and its adjoining areas as waterless as the Sahara, Juck's crew finished their work and returned to Fort Dragoon.

Juck, his clothes covered with dried mud, was told Tess Drummond was in the schoolhouse and promptly headed there.

"What did you do, fall in a bog?" she asked critically.

Juck grinned. The girl had been helping empty the river pools and wore jeans and man's shirt that were as soiled as Juck's.

"Some people yell for water and other folks yell because they got too much," he remarked and began crossing off on the map the tanks and pools his crew had disposed of.

Tess was glum, maybe because she realized that slopping around in muddy water was no help to a girl's looks. "You really think we got any chance of beating this gang? Or are we just working for the fun of it?"

Juck went on chalking out two waterholes. "All we got to do," he said cheerfully, "is to keep on seeing their tricks long enough ahead to offset 'em."

"And if they find tricks can't win, they'll try guns? Start another Lincoln County war?"

Juck nodded. "But that's up the trail. Right now if you want something to worry about, worry that it might rain. A hard rain could wreck us. But Amos Dunkerly predicts a long dry spell; says his wooden leg always aches a week ahead of every shower."

"I think," said Tess, watching Juck draw more lines through waterholes and tanks, "you ought to know how everyone appreciates what you've done for us, Professor. Everyone except Shad, and nobody pays any attention to him. I wish we could help you back some way."

Juck put down his chalk and looked at Tess Drummond. "You'll help me if you lick Eli Crabbe. Losing this valley will hurt him bad. He owns a lot of cattle and ranches in partnership with Gorington, but Crabbe's mostly in debt for his share. If they fail to get this valley, Crabbe might be in a bad way—maybe go bankrupt. But outside of that, I'd feel like helping people like the Dragoon folks with their brand of courage."

"They've got courage all right," said the girl. "Down to the children. All except me. I'm plain scared."

"That's the best kind of courage," Juck encouraged her. "The kind you find in a person that has enough sense to be scared and still goes on. My mother had that kind. She'd been raised back East, in a little New England town. When Dad brought her out to the San Benito country it was full of ornry Indians, ornry horses, ornry cattle. Mom was scared all right, but she had a lot of New England furniture and she had it shipped out and put in our old adobe house. And if she wasn't plumb happy there, she was the only one that knew it. I've got that furniture stored down on a ranch. Sort of hoped some day to find a girl that would like it."

"Any girl would like it, if you are hinting, Professor," said Tess. "That is, if the right husband went with the furniture."

"I knew there was a catch to it," he grumbled just as Mrs. McGuigan of the McGuigan House stuck her head in at the door, her usual brown-paper cigarette dangling from a mouth corner.

"Don't you think you'll set down to eat at my table with all that mud on you," she told Juck sternly. "I got a boiler of hot water on the stove and a clean shirt ironed for you. You go in and use 'em."

"Mrs. McGuigan, ma'am," said Juck, "you spoiled a trade. Here I was just about to sell myself off on a girl by throwin' in some good furniture on the deal."

"Then I arrived just in time," said Mrs. McGuigan. "With all that mud on you you'd be no bargain throwed in with a whole furniture factory."

"She's just running you down in hope of getting you herself," Tess said loyally. "I heard Mrs. McGuigan say you were the best-looking teacher they ever had here. She and Granny Doss both are planning to go back to school again."

"And can you blame us?" asked Mrs. McGuigan and conducted Juck to the dining room where he ate his usual wagonload of grub. After which he and John Drummond rode north to see how near the herds were to the Dragoon Valley. In the sagebrush valley north of the hills closing in the Dragoon, the three herds, several miles apart, were moving fast.

Finding the empty lake along the trail, the trail bosses were driving to reach the water

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to be found in pools in the little river running through the Dragoon.

Drummond and Spence watched until the head column, raising a dust cloud that looked like a prairie fire, filed into the Dragoon. The cattle, gaunted down by the long drive, shambled along. The river bottom, where only a few short days before the trail bosses had watered their horses on their ride to Pedragon, lay a short distance beyond. They found only dry sand there now.

FROM the cloaking brush of a hill, Juck and Drummond watched the bovine lead-of the herd snuffing holes where water had been. The cattle bellowed mournfully and the herders cursed.

The drive boss loped along the dry river bed, wondering evidently what had happened to the waterholes, while half a dozen cowboys scattered over the valley in a hunt for other water. In an hour the riders had all returned to the herd—to report their search hopeless.

Watched by Drummond and Juck, the trail boss saddled a fresh horse and rode south, evidently to report to Vance Talman. Near the herd, the cowboys started digging a well in the river bottom, intending to use a bucket to draw up enough water for their horses. A little later a second herd filed into the valley to be held also in the river bottom.

Juck and Drummond rode back to the fort. By now all the pools along the river had been drained. Only the large reservoir above the peach orchard still had water, and Zeb Trotter's steam pump was at work emptying it.

In the late afternoon a cloud of dust boiled up to the south. Field-glasses used from the roof of Drummond's store showed some 15 cowboys riding into the valley. Joined by half the riders from the herds, the horsemen rode like a whirlwind toward the fort.

"Here comes trouble," predicted Drummond.

Women and children hastily retreated into the fort buildings, while the men with their rifles took positions along the stone wall bordering the peach orchard. That wall would make a good barricade if it came to a fight.

When the group got closer, it was seen that Vance Talman headed it in the lead of more than 30 riders, cowboys from the trail crews and men Talman must have brought from his ranch. Some of the latter were from Pedragon, including the Harms boys and Buck-Tooth

Kane. It was a hard-bitten lot, with rifles in saddle scabbards and six-shooters belted to their middles. Juck looked for Rudd Lamper, but the gunman was not in the group.

Spurring hard, they clattered over the last hundred yards to pull up close to the orchard wall.

Vance Talman's face was red with anger that burned through his leathery skin. "What do you mean by wrecking all the waterholes in the country?" the tall cowman bellowed. "We've as much right to graze the valley as you people have to farm it. We've given you folks a square deal, letting the law decide who's to get the valley. Now when we bring in a few cattle, you try to keep them out by getting rid of all the water."

"What do you call a few cattle, Talman?" returned Drummond. "Twenty-five thousand head? And you claim you've played square with us. How about trying to chop down our peach trees and having our horses stolen?"

"Who says I did that?" demanded Talman. "And who says we're bringing in 25,000 head of cattle?"

"Me," spoke up Juck Spence. "Of course, I didn't tally 'em out exactly. Maybe there's 40,000."

Talman glared at Juck. "Maybe it was your idea to get rid of all the water in the country."

Juck grinned. "I can't tell a lie, *Papacito* Talman. It was my idea to get rid of the water and I did it all myself too, draining it all out with my little shovel."

TALMAN'S fury increased at this humorous answer. "You all listen to me!" he bawled. "I've got enough men to come in here and wipe the fort off the map, and you people along with it. And we'll do just that if we don't get water for our cattle. First I want that pump stopped. We'll use the water in the reservoir."

"The springs supplying this reservoir," stated Drummond "are private property. We bought them and the reservoir with the fort buildings from the War Department. If you want this water, Talman, you'll have to fight for it."

Drummond, with his bronze beard, his flashing blue eyes, as he delivered his defiance of Talman, made a fine figure of a man, thought Juck Spence. A father-in-law to be proud of—if he could keep Tess feeling the same.

Talman studied the settlers, standing holding,

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7. **RED DEVILS**—Three red discs are thrown on table by magician. One of the dice is placed in his pocket with right hand and the other two picked up in his left. Yet, when his left hand is opened, it contains THREE DICE. Can be repeated!
8. **MYSTIC TAGS**—Three tags, colored red, white and blue, are given to spectator, also a string. Spectator is asked to thread tags through top holes, and hold both ends of string. Magician removes center white tag without tearing it. A great stunt!
9. **MAGIC RATTLE BARS**—Three bars are shown. One rattles, two don't. They are mixed around and spectator is asked to tell which rattles, but ALWAYS fails! This trick alone usually sells for $1.00. It's a honey!
10. **AGAINST GRAVITY!**—A handkerchief is spread over a board and then two ordinary borrowed drinking glasses placed upon it. Magician turns the board upside down but glasses do not drop. One glass may be removed but other still remains in position. A most mystifying trick but E-Z to do with our secret apparatus.

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their rifles, plainly ready to go into action. Talman could see that they had the stone wall to use as barricade while his bunch were on horseback. He hesitated at a showdown, and while he sat his horse, a cowboy spoke to him. Talman glanced north. Another cloud of dust marked the approach of a third herd of cattle stringing into the valley.

Steadily the steam pump chugged away, throwing a big stream of water from the nozzle of the big pipe, with Zeb Trotter standing by the boiler. The reservoir was already low, with hardly enough water for one herd. Sight of the flowing water enraged Talman all the more, but the pumping gave him an idea. He could dig a big well in the river bottom and, by hooking the pump to it, get enough water to carry to the herds until other means could be devised.

"I'll buy that boiler and pump," he called to Trotter. "A thousand dollars cash."

"Not enough, Talman," Trotter returned, "and a million dollars ain't enough either."

"If your cattle are suffering," said Drummond, "you can just turn 'em loose and they'll find water in the Painted Hills and the mountains east."

Talman growled at that. Turning cattle loose in mountain country meant weeks to gather them again. He withdrew his men several hundred yards for a palaver.

The settlers waited watchfully. Then the Talman party finally split, half leaving their horses in charge of two men who would take them to the rocks on the slope, while the others headed west into the hills. It looked like a battle.

DRUMMOND hastily sent ten men to the the other side of the peach orchard to watch for an attack by the riders, just at the moment that dust began to lift from the stage road to the south. A pair of fast-stepping horses whirled a buckboard over the ridge and toward the fort.

Two men rode in the rig. Juck identified the driver as the lawyer, Eli Crabbe. Drummond identified the other for Juck as Crabbe's partner, the Easterner, Gorington, the latter dressed in the outlandish Spanish-Mexican costume he had adopted.

Talman, who was with the mounted group, also had seen the rig and returned with the riders. He loped ahead to meet the two. Crabbe, who was driving, pulled up. Then,

after a few minutes talk with Talman, Crabbe drove the rig on toward the men at the wall.

He stopped the team near Drummond's group and called a greeting to those of the settlers he knew by name. "Hello, Drummond. Hello, Parker. How are you, Morley?" His voice had the genial black-slapping tone of the professional politician.

"Now," Crabbe went on, "there's been a little misunderstanding here, but we want to keep all of this peaceful. Talman tells me you've emptied all the waterholes to keep our cattle out of the valley. You know that's illegal—it's interfering with the use of public land. We could sue you for heavy damages."

Drummond laughed. "Now, Crabbe, don't try to scare us with a lawsuit." He addressed the Easterner. "*Señor* Gorington, you're from the East and green to this country. Maybe you don't know you're riding with the biggest crook in the Territory?"

Gorington swallowed. "I have the highest confidence in Mr. Crabbe's integrity."

"You won't have for long," said Drummond bitterly. "Even if you fellows win here, you'll lose. Mr. Crabbe will skin you of every dollar."

Crabbe, casting his eyes around the group of men, identified Juck. "So you're up here, are you?" the lawyer asked. "You would do better to be down in the San Benitos trying to solve the murder of your brother."

"I've found this a better place to work on that," stated Juck. "And I'm getting closer to the answer. You were right, Crabbe, in advising me to go into court with the evidence to put a noose around your worthless neck. That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"That's bravo talk," Crabbe sneered.

"It won't sound so bravo when you feel that rope around your neck," said Juck quietly. "Around yours and Rudd Lamper's both."

If Juck hope to surprise Crabbe into some expression of shock at mention of Lamper's name, he was disappointed. Crabbe's poker face showed no change.

"Why don't we compromise all this?" put in Gorington. "I'm willing to pay you people for the improvements you've made in the valley."

"Keep your money," said Drummond. "We want this land for our homes and we're going to have it. You're from the East, Gorington. Have you ever seen any finer peach trees than these? Or any better wheat?"

"It happens that people can't live on peach blossoms and green wheat," commented Crabbe drily. "It'll be a long time until you can harvest either peaches or wheat. And by that time this year you'll be off this land. You'd best think over Gorington's offer. We'll pay you a fair sum to get out of here. I'd advise you all to consider it very carefully—especially men with families."

"Especially men that wouldn't want their children made orphans, eh?" said Drummond. "We've considered your offer and your threats both, you skunks. Keep away from us or we'll be shooting to kill. And get your cattle out of the valley; you'll never water them here."

"We'll see about that!" shouted Crabbe and, cursing, swung his team.

"Crabbe means business," said Tootin' Sam Parker. "We're settin' on a hot stove with the devil a-pokin' up the fire. They'll be back."

"They'll be back all right," repeated John Drummond soberly. "We been handed a declaration of war."

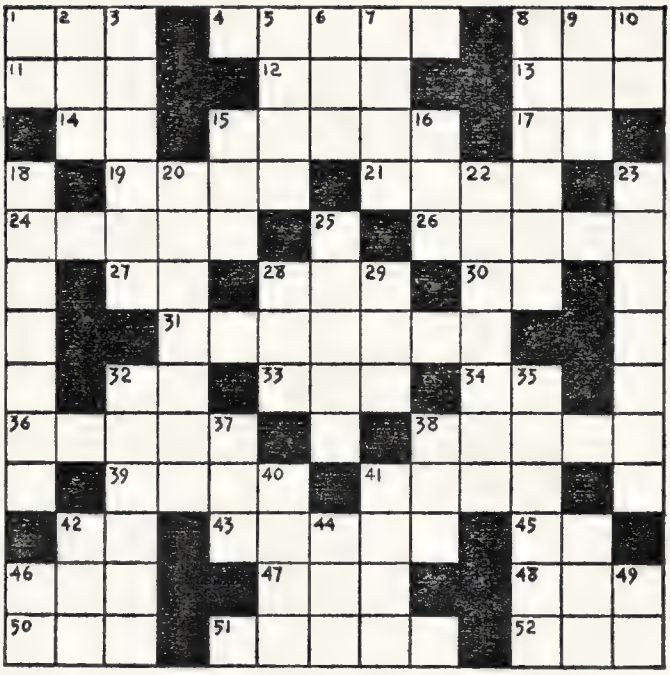
(To be continued in the next issue.)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 53)

1. The Hopi Indians of Arizona.
2. Mustangs—from the Spanish *mesteño* (mess-TANE-yo), which doubtless sounded to non-Spanish pioneers like muss-tang-o!
3. Early Texas cattle herds followed the wagon ruts of a half Cherokee trader named Jesse Chisholm, who thus gave his name to the Chisholm Trail. John S. Chisum, Jesse's distant kinsman, was a cattle king of the Pecos in New Mexico, owner of the famous Jinglebob outfit.
4. Practically no bed at all! Sleeping out with your saddle is called "a Tucson bed."
5. Tom J. Smith, Wild Bill Hickok's immediate predecessor, who enforced law and order for a time with his fists, but was shot and killed Nov. 2, 1870.
6. Sheep, for which such range is better.
7. Four.
8. The squaw. Navajo wives own the sheep too, as a rule, and more or less boss the hogan!
9. Most picturesque and probably most famous bandit and highway man of early day California. Only 22 years old when killed by Capt. Harry Love, a former Texas Ranger.
10. A wagon boss is the boss of a cow-work or roundup. Buggy boss is what old-timers called a dude owner who rode around his range in a buggy instead of on horseback.

THE WESTERNERS' Crossword Puzzle



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

ACROSS

1. A term of respect
4. A channel for conveying water
8. A convulsive sigh
11. A unit
12. To grow old
13. To weep
14. North Dakota (Abbrev.)
15. The waste of burned coal
17. A prefix meaning "back"
19. A suffix meaning "process"
21. A quantity
24. To make void
26. A lance with a barbed prong
27. Half a printer's measure
28. A wing
30. The indefinite article
31. An overseer
32. Mixed type
33. A feline
34. Northeast (Abbrev.)
36. The external appearance
38. Punitive
39. A Persian ruler
41. To practice horsemanship
42. Height (Abbrev.)
43. To return a plant to a pot
45. Right (Abbrev.)
46. The sound made by a cow
47. To soak
48. A combining form meaning "earth"
50. A snake-like fish
51. A raid
52. A strong desire

Solution to Second July Puzzle

DOWN

1. Therefore
2. A tavern
3. Performed again
5. A young girl
6. An expression of disgust
7. A reward
8. To protect
9. Raw metal
10. Near
15. To feel pain
16. A ship's call for help
18. A bundle of goods
20. A trick of a bucking horse
22. Matched for running in harness
23. A Mexican cultivated bean
25. A lancet
28. A segment of a circle
29. Amount (Abbrev.)
32. A small hand gun
35. Strength
37. The organ of hearing
38. The shaft of a mine
40 A courageous man
41. A roster
42. To clear of weeds
44. By means of
46. A pronoun
49. Upon

WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

BILL WOOD, city manager of Ogden, Utah, is rodeo boss of that city's Pioneer Days. Bill writes that their dates have been set for July 20th to the 24th inclusive, that they're paying $1,500 in each of the five major events and plan to have the greatest collection of trick riders and ropers ever to perform in Ogden. Harry Rowell of Hayward, Calif., is furnishing the stock and will produce the show. Abe Lefton, rated as rodeo's greatest announcer, will be at the mike. Homer and Elmer Holcomb will do the clowning, both plenty good, especially when it comes to staging a burlesque of bullfighting.

Business concerns and individual businessmen are donating handsome trophies for the winners of the major events. Bill reminds us that Ogden is a producer of real champion cowboys, and darned if I don't believe it!

Helen Clancy Hammerschmidt, daughter of the famous Foghorn Clancy, is the new editor of the Rodeo Fans' Magazine. She's also secretary of the Rodeo Fans' Assn., and plenty capable of handling both jobs. Her father has for many years been publicity director of the JE Ranch rodeo.

Helen's husband, Red, is probably in the Army by now. At the last word he had passed his physical and was awaiting the call to the colors. Red is one of the top-hands of the rodeo game, and earlier this season was contesting with the JE outfit on tour of Middle Western cities. Later on the JE will play Toronto, Canada.

Since the passing of our old friend, Sheriff Lon Jordan of Maricopa Co., Ariz., the rodeo world has been given a surprise. Another old friend, Everett Bowman, for many years champion cowboy, has announced his decision to run for the sheriff's office. Here are a few notes on Everett's career—winner of the all-around championship title in 1935 and '37, and three times runner-up for the title: '36, '38, and '39; five times winner of the bulldogging championship, four times of the calf-roping and once of the steer-roping title. Quite a record!

Last fall Bowman decided to take leave of active contesting at the Madison Square Garden Garden show, where he won $3,873, the largest amount of any single contestant. Now that he's running for sheriff, he's training his adopted son to take his place in rodeo, and the youngster is going to have to be plenty good. We hope Everett will be answering to the greeting of "Howdy, Sheriff," before long.

The Daddy of 'Em All, the Cheyenne Frontier Days, is set for July 25th-29th inclusive. This year will be their 48th annual rodeo, and the purses have been upped. Bob Hanesworth, secretary of the Frontier Days, says their list of contestants is truly the Who's Who of the Rodeo World. In case there's a wartime shortage of young ropers, Bob knows that cattlemen from all over Wyoming will be on hand to give the folks a taste of old-time roping. While these old-timers won't break records, they'll show the crowds a contest that will prove that the ranchers know their stuff with a rope.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it.

Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

Cowboy Sergeant

MY BUDDIES call 'em foxholes,
These diggings in the sand;
And so do I when talking
'Bout the war just man to man.

But when I hear the signal
To dig in for the night,
And know I won't be hearing
"Sarge this, Sarge that" 'till light. . . .

I cuddle down to watch
Or mostly just to think,
And I ain't no more a sergeant
But a plain ol' western gink.

The jungle over yonder
Is the cactus growth at home;
And the beach that stretches by it
Is the prairie we used to roam.

The sounds that fill the darkness
Strike a real familiar note,
And I seem to sense the presence
Of the range's wild coyote.

And then I laugh remembering
How I used to stop the critters' feed;
And I 'low these slant-eyed snipers
Ain't a whit likelier to succeed.

My foxhole becomes a campfire,
And the dogies to be protected,
Are all the privates and corporals
And the land of yours, respected.

I ain't never let a bossman down
Nor 'lowed trespassers to cross his range;
But a western saddle's my favorite seat
And this machine gun nest feels strange.

Still tonight Uncle Sam's a-hiring me
And to do the job right is my aim;
Whether from foxhole or campfire at coyote or Jap,
To shoot straight is still all the same.

Sure, my buddies call 'em foxholes,
These diggings in the sand;
But when the Sarge digs in at night
He becomes just a plain ranch hand.

Sam Allen Cofer, College Station, Texas

The Grass Is Up

THE grass is up, the sky is blue,
It's springtime on the range;
The yucca blooms are budding, too,
Spring has touched the plains.

The grass is up, it's spring and more,
The cowboys gladly shout;
Work begins as saddles sway
And dogies frisk about.

The grass is up, the snow is gone,
Melted into streams;
You can hear the cowboys' cattle call
As he sings, and laughs, and dreams.

Pvt. Deloris Raabe, U.S.M.C.W.R.

Cowboy In Khaki

MY HEART belongs to a cowboy
Who's wearing khaki now.
I've missed him so, since he had to go,
But I'll get by somehow.

He's gone to fight for his country;
And for our democracy.
But I'll watch and wait
By the old ranch gate
Until he returns to me.

Juanita Pennington, Hamilton, O.

I Want To Be A Cowgirl

I WANT to be a cowgirl,
And live in wide open spaces,
I want to be a cowgirl,
And ride in bronco races.

When the Texas moon comes up,
I want to ride along,
And play an old guitar,
And sing a Western song.

When the Western moon shines bright,
And the stars are up above,
I want to walk in the moonlight,
With the cowboy whom I love.

Lucille Bolick, Granite Falls, N.C.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Don't Keep Her Waiting!

Dear Editor:

I am 14 years old and have light brown hair and blue eyes. My favorite subjects in school are French, Latin, and Spanish. My hobbies are dancing, playing basketball and horseback riding. I own two horses whose names are Sandy and Rusty. Would like to hear from boys and girls from 14 to 18 years old. Promise to answer all letters. Please don't keep me waiting!

CHARLENE WHITE

c/o Box 124,
Phillips, Me.

Stranger in Oregon

Dear Editor:

Would you please print my letter asking for pen pals? I'm 20 years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from everywhere. We've just moved to Oregon and don't know anyone here. It gets awfully lonesome and letters would help—so please write, won't you?

BETTY PEDERSON

13th & Yamhill Sts.,
McMinnville, Ore.

Real Outdoor Girl

Dear Editor:

I've read RANCH ROMANCES for some time and I certainly would appreciate it if I could make friends through Our Air Mail. I'm 15 years old and have long blond hair and blue eyes. Am a real outdoor girl. Would like to hear from those who like horseback riding, skating and dancing. Here's hoping that I'll get lots of letters.

DELORES JANE EISSINGER

Box 217,
Wishek, N.D.

Down Under Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely country girl living in a country way down under. Am 16 years old and am a blonde with blue eyes and fair complexion. Would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world. My hobbies are collecting snapshots, stamps and souvenirs. I also enjoy horseback riding. Please fill my mailbox.

PEARL HORSFALL

Henry's Rd.,
Waikato, North Island,
New Zealand

Young Girl in Strange City

Dear Editor:

I am a young girl in a strange city who would like to snare a few pen pals. Am 18 years old and have brown hair and eyes. Letters from boys and girls everywhere from 18 to 25 will be heartily welcomed, and I'll do my best to answer promptly. Will send my snap to the first five who write. My hobbies are music, which includes anything from jazz to grand opera. I also like skiing, baseball and cycling. Am especially interested in the West and would like to hear from a real honest-to-goodness cowboy or cowgirl.

MARGUERITE J. WILKINS

292 Bain Ave.,
Toronto, Ont., Canada

No Wizard at Writing

Dear Editor:

How about writing to a lonely country boy who wants pen pals very much? I'm no wizard at writing, but will do my best. Will exchange snapshots and souvenirs. I'm 17 years and have dark brown hair and brown eyes. My favorite sports are horseback riding and bike riding. My hobbies are collecting stamps and postcards. Promise to answer all letters. Please, everyone, write to a lonely country boy.

HOLLIS TAYLOR

R. 1, Box 166,
Marietta, Miss.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST"

There's a Thrill In Bringing a Crook to Justice Through Scientific

CRIME DETECTION

I have taught thousands of men and women this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, too, *in your own home.* Prepare yourself in your leisure time to fill a responsible, steady, well-paid position in a very short time and at very small cost. What others have done you, too, can do.

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Employ I.A.S. students or graduates. "I will teach you Finger Print Identification—Firearms Identification—Police Photography—and Secret Service." That's what I told the men who now handle jobs in Identification Bureaus throughout the nation.

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FREE! "BLUE BOOK OF CRIME"

It's a thriller, filled from cover to cover with exciting information on scientific crime detection. It tells about some of the most interesting crimes of modern times, and how the criminals were brought to justice through the very methods which you are taught at I.A.S. The book will tell you, too, how at a cost so low you shouldn't even think of it, you can get started on this important work without delay. Don't wait. Clip the coupon and send it along today.

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Gentlemen: Without obligation, send me the "Blue Book of Crime," and complete list of Identification Bureaus employing your students or graduates, together with your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. (Literature will be sent ONLY to persons stating their age.)

Name .....

Address .....

..... **Age** .....

SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

THE WAR . . . THE STARS . . . AND YOU

BORN deep in the summertime, the girl of Leo is warm-blooded and warm-hearted. She loves life and laughter and, quite in keeping with her vitality, is inclined to feel the small anguishes of living too keenly. She has much vigor and spirit, and may feel herself driven by ambition. This she should not deny, and these times are her real opportunity. Putting this energy and urge to succeed to work now will bring her a great deal of satisfaction and do her country some real good.

Emergencies were made for the Leo girl. Of commanding presence, serene exterior, vibrant emotions, she thrills to unusual circumstances and will fashion out the career which she seeks. There is no type of war or defense work into which the vital Leo girl cannot fit herself easily. She will find herself quickly assuming responsibilities. In wartime, when each group contributing to the effort needs a leader, the Leo girl will be able to assume this vital role. And she will revel in it!

In her emotional life the Leo girl runs a grave risk of letting her warmth and full-bloodedness run away with herself. She needs a mate who will not attempt to hold her down, who is big enough to let her talents have free play. She has enough energy for her home and her children and outside defense efforts too. She will find that, if she is married, she can organize sewing units and first-aid units, for example. And if she is not, she may perhaps go off to fabulous action in the WACS or the WAVES.

Stout-hearted and unafraid, as her zodiac-namesake, Leo the Lion, the girl born between July 24 and Aug. 23, has the world at her feet if she wishes—and her gifts belong to the world.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name ..... Sex.....

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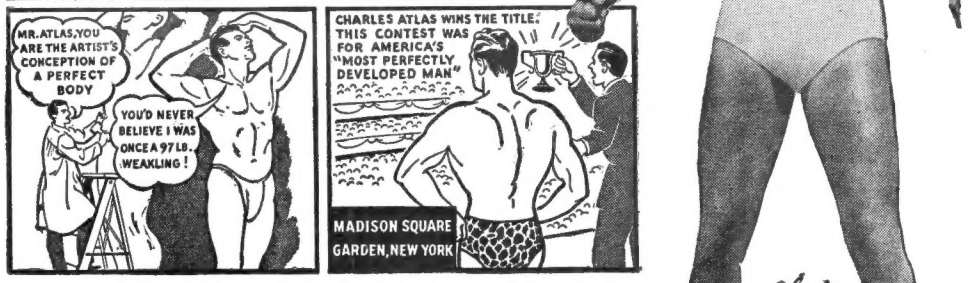
The inspiring story of CHARLES ATLAS

CHARLES, YOU POOR BOY! YOU STAY SO THIN-AND ALWAYS TIRED!
I KNOW, MOM. THE FELLOWS ARE CALLING ME "THE WEAKLING!"
RUN ALONG KID! WE NEED A HUSKY HE-MAN FOR THIS JOB!
HELP WANTED
I'M GOING TO FIND SOME WAY TO GET A BUILD LIKE THAT!
LIFE GUARD

SO CHARLES ATLAS SPENT MONTH AFTER MONTH SEARCHING FOR A WAY TO DEVELOP HIS BODY. AND FINALLY HE DISCOVERED HIS AMAZING METHOD-- DYNAMIC TENSION!
LATER
BOY! DYNAMIC TENSION SURE GAVE ME A REAL BUILD FAST! I'M A NEW MAN!


MR. ATLAS, YOU ARE THE ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF A PERFECT BODY
YOU'D NEVER BELIEVE I WAS ONCE A 97 LB. WEAKLING!
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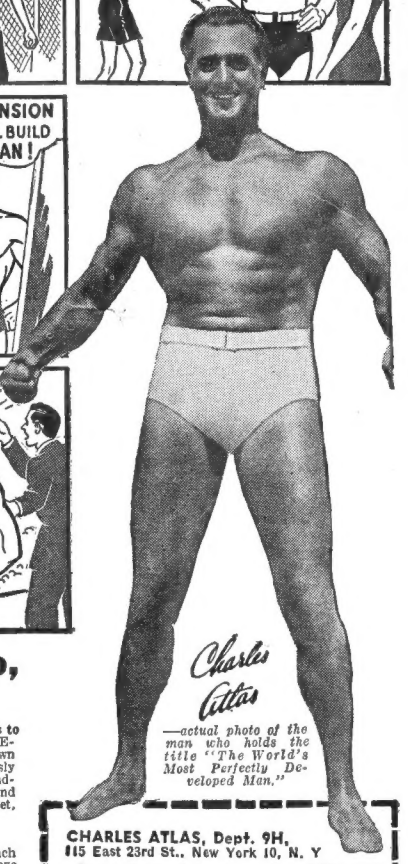

Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make You a New Man, Too, In Only 15 Minutes a Day!

If you're the way I USED to be—if you are skinny and feel only half-alive—if the better jobs pass you by—if you're in the service, but are being "pushed around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—and if you want a HE-MAN's body—then give me just 15 minutes a day!

I'll PROVE you can have a build you'll be PROUD of; *"Dynamic Tension"* will do it for *you*, too! *That's* how I changed my own build into such perfect proportions that famous sculptors and artists have paid me to pose for them. My body won me the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I can give you solid, beautiful, USEFUL muscle wherever YOU want it!

"DYNAMIC TENSION" Does It

In only 15 minutes a day, *"Dynamic Tension"* can bulge up your chest, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a New Man! In fact, I GUARANTEE you'll start seeing results in the first 7 days!

I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You simply utilize the UNDEVELOPED muscle-power in your own God-given body — almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY. And it's so easy—my secret, *"Dynamic Tension,"* does the trick!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows in every branch of the service as well as civilians have used my *"Dynamic Tension"* to change themselves into real HE-MEN! Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book *—free.* Tells all about *"Dynamic Tension,"* shows actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. And I can do the same for YOU. Mail the coupon *now!* Address me personally: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9H, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a new man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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